

<b>Committee(s)</b> Epping Forest and Commons	<b>Dated</b> 25/01/2024
<b>Subject:</b> Epping Forest and Commons Physical Access Discussion (SEF 04/24)	<b>Public</b>
<b>Which outcomes in the City Corporation's Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?</b>	<b>4,11,12</b>
<b>Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>If so, how much?</b>	<b>N/A</b>
<b>What is the source of Funding?</b>	<b>N/A</b>
<b>Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain's Department?</b>	<b>N/A</b>
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### Summary

This report presents an overview of physical access issues and approaches to access for Epping Forest, Burnham Beeches and The Commons. It summarises access improvements currently in place and suggests further improvements and recommended actions.

### Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- Note the contents of the report and discuss priorities for action.

### Main Report

#### Background

1. Epping Forest is held and managed by the City of London Corporation acting as the Conservators of Epping Forest under the Epping Forest Act 1878 which requires that it be maintained as an open space for *recreation and enjoyment* by the public.
2. The City Commons is comprised of nine sites which are managed by four different charities operating under the Corporation of London (Open Spaces Act) 1878. This Act enables the City to acquire and protect land up to 25 miles out from the boundary of the square mile to keep it unenclosed and unbuilt upon as open space for the recreation and

enjoyment of the public. A major part of the four charity's funding comes from the City of London Corporation.

3. Epping Forest receives around ten million visitors annually whilst Burnham Beeches and the Commons receive an estimated combined total of 1.6 million visitors.
4. The Public Sector Equality Duty requires public authorities to consider how their policies and decisions impact people who are protected under the Equality Act 2010. This includes the elimination of unlawful discrimination, advancing equality of opportunity and fostering good relations between people with protected characteristics. The duty is often addressed through the development of an Equality Impact Assessment.
5. The *Outdoor Accessibility Guide: Supporting inclusive outdoor access in the UK* is a guide to best practice for access to the countryside produced by the Sensory Trust and Paths for All in 2023 and updates earlier documents in responding to the Equality Act 2010
6. The guide recognises the wide variety of possibilities and constraints that face landowners and managers, from limited resources to the importance of balancing access with the conservation of cultural and natural heritage, as well as landscape character. In the absence of statutory standards for outdoor access improvements, it provides a framework for improving access.
7. The guide works on the basis that it does not require information on specific visitors to be able to identify what access improvements should be made. What is needed most is an in-depth knowledge of the full range of experiences a site could offer and communicating these well. The aim is not to ensure that everyone has access to the same overall experience, but to an equal quality of experience.
8. The guide promotes two tools that help landowners achieve an inclusive approach:
  - a. Least Restrictive Access approach. The principle of Least Restrictive Access (LRA) is that all new work and maintenance repairs should aim to achieve the most accessible option. Least Restrictive Access is achieved by identifying the least restrictive option for a specific element, such as a gate or a piece of interpretation. The key is to look for opportunities to improve accessibility and reduce restrictions rather than assuming there are sites and routes where options do not exist and where the onus is on justifying lack of action.
  - b. Access Chain: The Access Chain was developed by the Sensory Trust to ensure that access planning relates to all parts of an outing. The Access Chain starts with the first step of making a decision to go somewhere; followed by the journey, then the experience itself and ending with a safe return home. If any link in the chain is broken then what should be an enjoyable day out, can turn to disappointment, or may never happen.

9. This guide is designed to align with key guidance including 'By All Reasonable Means', in England and Wales and was funded by Forestry and Land Scotland, Forestry England, Natural England, NatureScot, Paths for all and Sport Northern Ireland.

## Current Position

10. The Natural Environment Department is about to launch a new Access and Recreation Strategy. Its vision is:  
*We aim to conserve, enhance and sustainably manage our open spaces' special natural environments and their heritage; and we will welcome, encourage and inspire our visitors to enjoy and protect these spaces for future generations.*
11. Within the strategy there are two objectives specifically about improving physical access:  
Theme 3, Objective 3: Ensure that sites have least restrictive access  
Theme 3, Objective 4: Work towards excellence for physical access
12. Epping Forest, Burnham Beeches and the City Commons have been Green Flag award sites since 2003. The Green Flag Award scheme recognises and rewards well managed parks and green spaces, setting the benchmark standard for the management of recreational outdoor spaces across the United Kingdom and around the world. The award's purpose and aims include:
  - To ensure that everybody has access to quality green and other open spaces, irrespective of where they live.
  - To ensure that these spaces are appropriately managed and meet the needs of the communities that they serve.
  - To establish standards of good management.
13. It is estimated that one in five people in the UK is living with a disability. The Natural Environment Division wishes to achieve inclusive access through the Least Restrictive Access (LRA) and Access Chain model. This model improves access for the widest possible audiences and does not rely on targeting or analysing particular groups or disabilities; rather that it recognises that most people fit in to more than one category of audience segmentation. Therefore what may work for a wheelchair user is likely to also suit someone with a visual impairment or someone pushing a pram or an older person who would prefer a less strenuous walk.
14. LRA is not just about physical access and it is important to consider all accessibility issues. It will not be possible, to make all countryside fully accessible for everyone, nonetheless, LRA principles require those organisations with a responsibility for providing access to the outdoors to strive to maximise accessibility for as many people as possible.

## **Epping Forest**

15. A Heritage Lottery Fund grant awarded in 2008 funded a series of access improvements including refurbishment of four car parks with dedicated disabled bays and bound surfacing, and three easy access trails.
16. The All Ability Paths (formerly Easy Access Trails) have hard bound surfaces, are 2m in width and are spread geographically across the Forest at Wanstead Park, Knighton Woods, Connaught Water and High Beach.
17. A further ten way marked trails were created with posts marking a range of routes of varied length and difficulty.
18. A major consultation exercise for the Epping Forest Management Plan in 2015 showed that some of the highest priorities for visitors was to have better orientation and way marking in the Forest as well as a better standard of paths and more public toilets.
19. Your Committee received a report for a Paths Development Policy in 2020. This contained a ten-year programme to audit and improve the path network across Epping Forest without conflicting with the Conservation designations upon the Forest.
20. The path network within Epping has developed over time and falls into three main groups: natural paths of varying surface type, all weather routes (surfaced rides) which are a constructed with aggregates and all ability paths (easy access trails) as described above.
21. There are 41 km of public rights of way (PRoW) in Epping Forest and the Buffer Lands. In addition, there are around 81 km of paths managed as routes suitable for horse riding, cycling and walking, with some routes seasonally unavailable for riding and cycling. Across the Forest there is an unquantified network of unofficial paths. A review of the path network in 2019 identified 198 km of paths where the City of London could be considered to have a management responsibility.
22. Local access improvements are being made in Epping Forest to improve access to parts of the Forest that neighbour urban areas. This aims to provide a welcoming and quality experience for visitors from nearby towns so that they can visit on foot, without the need for a car and that are served by public transport. An example of this is the Goldings Hill access improvement project.

## **Burnham Beeches and The City Commons**

23. Burnham and the City Commons have been working to the principles of LRA for over 20 years since first promoted in the BT Countryside for all guidelines (1995). Key actions arising from this are:
  - a. Site infrastructure including gates, benches signage installed as per BT countryside for all standards since 2001 and Sensory Trust guidance produced in 2023.

- b. When 2.8 miles of internal roads at Burnham Beeches were closed to public traffic in 2001 – this created what is now known as the car free zone - which blue badge holders can still access in a vehicle, either individually or in groups, via an automatic gate at the end of the car parks. This allows those with either temporary or permanent mobility issues to have the ability to enjoy areas of the site that would otherwise be less or inaccessible for them.
- c. A tramper mobility scooter has been available for free loan since 2008 with a new scooter purchased in 2022 with filming income. This allows access from the Burnham Beeches yard through an electrically operated gate straight onto the open space without going on public roads.
- d. We have sought to make volunteer opportunities accessible to those with different needs and supported groups with diverse abilities to regularly contribute to/be involved with sites across the Commons. This area of activity has been impacted by the COVID crisis.

24. Where improvement works are undertaken accessibility is a key design criterion. Recent access improvement works include:

- a. Easy access path Burnham Beeches - maintained as a solid even surfaced path – slopes audited by CoL access team and lots of parallel sections giving a variety of visit options – and passing key features such as ponds, ancient pollards and Mendelsohn’s Slope. A clear walking tunnel, as per the Countryside for All guidance, is maintained at all times.
- b. Sculpture/sensory trail installed with support from CoL Access Team, circa 2008, originally installed with an audio guide which is now obsolete. Sculptures are being updated in 2023/24 using income from filming and will include QR codes for people to scan to get additional information and could include a facility in the future to have new audio guide.
- c. Car park accessibility improvements across three sites with the Burnham Beeches car park being given an accessible parking award.
- d. Cafe improvements at Burnham Beeches include a range of seating options, including perch benches, traditional tables and chairs but also fixed picnic benches in all areas around the cafe with either gaps built into them for wheelchairs/ pushchairs/ different seats, or with extended tops to allow different seating arrangements at either end of the picnic tables, as well as the more usual picnic benches. 30% of public toilets provided are accessible/disabled toilets.

25. Whilst individual operational access audits have been undertaken on some buildings and facilities across the sites there is a lack of an overarching assessment of access provision across Burnham Beeches and the City Commons.

## Access Chain

26. Access information has been provided on the Visit England site Epping Forest | Accessibility Guides. This website will be closing in March and will be replaced by a paid for access assessment Update on Accessibility information initiatives | VisitBritain.org. The City of London website has not to date allowed hosting of the access guides already produced for our honeypot locations and visitor centres.
27. Outreach programmes have been run to encourage visually impaired users to access the Epping Forest Museum as well as various other outreach programmes.
28. We are working in partnership with the Epping Forest Heritage Trust who are providing a range of outreach programmes to encourage access to the Forest and break down perceived social or intellectual barriers to access. These have included guided walks with the Muslim Hikers and Black Girls Hike.
29. Improvements and actions relating to the Access Chain will be addressed through the sites' communication plans.

## Proposals and Actions

30. *Access information improvements*: Pre-visit information on the CoL website is currently limited and a means of improving the quantity and quality of the content is required. An increasingly common practice is the use of short videos to show the actual terrain so that visitors can decide on accessibility according to their own abilities and appropriateness of their equipment.
31. *Path auditing changes*: Auditing of paths is under way at Epping Forest following the proposals laid out in the 2019 Path Development Note while the smaller extent of the path network at Burnham Beeches and City commons allows for a more reactive approach to practical path management. Establishing a consistent approach to auditing the path networks across all the sites will help to quantify the scope and scale of path management liabilities and improve anticipation of improvement/repair issues.
32. *Least restrictive access*: LRA principles have not yet been applied fully across all sites with, for example, the 2019 Path Development Note proposing a ten-year phased assessment of the Epping Forest path network. Similarly, the increasing use of the GPS collars on cattle could mean some existing fencing gating may now not be required. Earlier assessment of the Buffer Lands and ongoing assessment of the gating needs following expansion of the use of GPS cattle collars would be helpful in speeding up accessibility actions in some areas.

33. *Access plan*: It is impractical to make all areas of the countryside fully accessible to everyone. The aim should be to ensure that an equal quality of experience is available to everyone. This means considering all protected characteristics, understanding what currently restricts access and for who, and prioritising improvements that give the most equitable results. This means consideration should be given to how well located and provided are our easy access trails and other main rides and more accessible paths. Consideration should be given to how easily accessed accessible routes are by public transport as well as by private vehicle. Accessibility to quality experiences on foot or by mobility scooter from nearby urban areas should also be considered. Each site will need to produce an Access Plan and Equalities Impact Assessment.
34. *Local Access Points*: Local access improvement projects in Epping Forest should be extended, opening up access points for some existing desire lines and as far as possible next to bus stops and public transport and integrating access points with access interventions. Burnham Beeches and The Commons have not yet assessed how well integrated with the public transport system or local residential areas the different sites are. Further assessment and planning on this area of work could be helpful to improve accessibility and quality of experience

## **Strategic Implications**

35. Access improvements contribute to the following corporate priorities.

### *Contribute to a flourishing society*

- People are safe and feel safe.
- People enjoy good health and wellbeing.

### *Shape outstanding environments*

- We have clean air, land and water and a thriving and sustainable natural environment.
- Our spaces are secure, resilient and well-maintained

## **Financial Implications**

36. Actions will have either been met through the local risk budget or from external grants and income generation.

## **Resource Implications**

37. Actions will be implemented using existing staffing resources supplemented by contractors where required.

## **Legal Implications**

38. Any organisation that owns and manages outdoor spaces in England has duties under The Equality Act 2010 the Act not to discriminate against people with protected characteristics.
39. The Equality Act 2010 does not override conditions associated with planning, listed building legislation, scheduled monuments and inclusion on Historic England's 'Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in England'. Access improvements will require approval in relation to these designations and in most cases approval for works will be required from Natural England.

### **Equalities Implications**

40. An equalities impact assessment to review physical access arrangements to the sites is recommended within the report.

### **Charity Implications**

41. Epping Forest and Burnham Beeches and the Commons are registered charities. Charity Law obliges Members, when acting as trustees of the charity, to ensure that the decisions they take in relation to the Charity must be taken in the best interests of the Charity.

### **Climate Implications**

42. None

### **Conclusion**

43. This report has provided an outline of the management and recent development of physical access at Epping Forest, Burnham Beeches and the Common.
44. Areas for further consideration and improvement have been outlined for discussion by Members.

### **Background Papers**

- Path Management: Policy Development Note SEF 23/20b  
[Committee Report Template \(cityoflondon.gov.uk\)](#)  
Appendix 1: [Path Management \(cityoflondon.gov.uk\)](#)
- <https://www.sensorytrust.org.uk/uploads/documents/ByAllReasonableMeansEnglandAug2020.pdf>
- [outdoor-accessibility-guidance-2023.pdf \(pathsforall.org.uk\)](#)

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