

Committee(s): Epping Forest and Commons Committee – For information	Dated: 21/03/2024
Subject: The Commons – Assistant Directors Update October 2023 -January 2024	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 October 2023 and January 2024. 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 January 2024 (period 10-24) 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 January 2024 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 Ashtead 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

- 1. Car Parking Income (Fig 1):** Overall for the calendar year (Jan-Dec) car parking income is about 91% of the annual average. The drop is largely attributable to the weather with periods of wet and inclement weather reducing visits. Reduced income at Riddlesdown Car Park follows a pattern where free local on road parking is reducing the numbers who park in the Car Park
- 2. Volunteering (Fig 4):** Volunteers undertook 5817 hours (845 seven-hour days) of work during the period, the equivalent of £58,170 using the National Lottery Heritage Fund's match funding calculator. Overall, in the ten months since April, volunteer time represents the equivalent of £136,330 of much appreciated 'matched funding' from local people.
- 3.** A large proportion of the volunteers time has been taken up undertaking scrub management of some form, eg clearing hawthorn that is encroaching grassland and holly clearance within woodland. Hazel coppicing has continued across various sites with the cut materials used on hedge laying projects. Volunteers from the Surrey Hegelaying group undertook hazel coppicing at Ashtead Common with the cut hazel used on their projects and were full of praise for the woodland and quality of the hazel *'As a club we take pride in the hedges we lay and it is heartwarming to know that there are still people around that take pride in managing their coppices. These are traditions that support each other and together add to the overall management of the countryside benefiting both wildlife and nature.'*
- 4.** Ashtead Common hosted the joint volunteer task in conjunction with neighbouring Epsom common in January. Volunteers across the Commons have also helped with livestock lookering during this period.
- 5.** At Burnham Beeches the Tuesday Eco volunteer group have been carrying out an evaluation of air quality at the Beeches, using lichens. This work complements direct measurement of air quality funded by a section 106 grant from the power station on Slough trading estate and results will be fed into a wider online meeting at the end of February. These volunteers have also helped with an ongoing experiment to look at the impact of cutting young pollards at different times of year this work is being supported by researchers from University College London.
- 6. Energy use and Production (Fig 2):** PV energy production was down by 11% in the period October to December on the five-year average. Overall for the year Jan to Dec PV energy production was 88.2% and energy use 98.2% of the five year average.

7. **Accidents:** Accident data is given on figures 7 (Accidents by month) and 8 (Accidents by type). During the period we only had one accident where a member of staff cut themselves with a pruning saw. Overall, we have recorded 12 incidents over the ten months since April 2023.

Additional Important Updates

Rural Payments Agency Independent Agricultural Appeals Panel

8. 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. In December the IAAP unequivocally accepted the Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common Charity's case and recommended that there should be a full payment of the CSS grant as originally agreed. The final decision however rests with the Minister of Agriculture's office and the Minister chose to ignore the IAAP's recommendation and concluded that the original RPA decision to not pay the grant as agreed should stand.
9. The Chairman has made representation to the Minister in writing that this decision will have a significant impact on the BBSC charity and requested he reconsider. In addition, at the time of writing officers were preparing a Pre-action protocol request to be submitted to the Ministers office to seek to better understand the basis for the Ministers decision. An urgency report will be separately prepared on this issue following receipt of any comments from the Ministers office.

Events and educational activities

10. As this reporting period covered Christmas, events across the Commons included wreath making, Christmas themed trails, Carol singing and volunteer thank you events. Family Ranger days have introduced young people to hands on conservation work at Ashted Common. Fungal forays were held across Coulsdon Common along with a besom broom making workshop. At Burnham Beeches fungi surveys were led by the Bucks Fungus Group and this will be followed up with training from the group about the interest and importance of the fungi at Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common.

Licences

11. UK Power Network was granted A licence to coppice and cut back scrub along power lines that run between Farthing downs and happy valley - this work is supported by Croydon Council and Natural England.
12. At Ashted Common Network Rail were granted a licence for a small works compound near Woodlands Road to facilitate the installation of warning lights to improve safety at Lady Howard's Crossing.

Recruitment and Apprentices

13. Across the Commons we have four roles currently vacant. Community Engagement Ranger and Assistant Ranger at Burnham Beeches, Support Services Assistant at Ashted Common and Conservation Ranger (Ecology) at West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons. In addition, we are looking at recruiting an apprentice for Ashted Common.
14. The fourth round of recruitment for the Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common Conservation Officer who is retiring is underway. The role has been reprofiled as a Veteran Tree and Wood Pasture Lead with interviews scheduled for the 9th April 2024.

Training and Development

15. Various team members across The Commons have completed the IOSHH managing safety training/refreshers. The two apprentices are progressing well with their college courses and have completed various other bits of training including NPTC level 2 chainsaw training. Burnham Beeches hosted a Commons wide decaying wood training day and organised training around why trees fall over for volunteers and staff.

Livestock

16. Sussex cattle have been grazing areas of chalk grassland since January utilising no fence colour technology at Farthing Downs and Kenley Commons. To date 11 calves, out of a total hoped for 17, had been born at the Merlewood estate yard.
17. The cattle at Burnham Beeches have gone to their winter quarters having grazed all the invisible fences area at the Beeches in 2023 with the No Fence system. The ponies are still working hard over at the west part of Stoke Common.

Project work

18. Following the necessary consultation and notification process undertaken throughout 2023 and this Committee's decision to extend the Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs) Burnham Beeches for a further three years in September 2023, with two minor modifications - the PSPO's were duly extended for a further three years from December the 1st 2023.
19. Winter habitat work has been in full swing across the commons with 73 ancient pollards worked on at Ashtead Common along with another 50 at Burnham Beeches where 100 young pollards were also cut, for a 2nd or 3rd time, on a 10–15-year rotation.
20. Work has been completed to create a new pond on Coulsdon Common with an additional pond to be established on Kenley Common. At the end of January contractors started work to coppice sweet chestnut at Spring Park as part of a rotational coppice programme.
21. At Stoke Common heathland restoration work was undertaken on around 0.5 hectares of land on the West Common by volunteers and contractors who also undertook wood pasture restoration works at Burnham Beeches on a similar sized area.

Survey and monitoring

22. At Burnham Beeches fungus gnats collected during field work for saproxylic beetles in summer 2022 have recently been identified. Catches included two species listed as red data book or nationally scarce. Three species of fly were also found that are parasitoids of woodlice. None of these are especially rare but they are new records for Burnham Beeches.
23. Star fruit (*Damasonium alisima*) a very rare plant nationally was found to have had a good year at Stoke Common in 2023 by a Natural England national survey. 38 individual plants were found in one pond, estimated to provide 11500 thousand seeds.

Consultative Committees

24. The Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common Consultative Group was held on the 30th January 2024 with 18 attendees, excluding officers and EF&CC members. The annual report of the Community Engagement Rangers on their first year working on the SAMMS and S106 project at Burnham Beeches was well received. Questions on the future financing of Burnham Beeches were raised following the Assistant Director's Report and the Chairman set out the City's funding situation. Verderer Morris suggested that the charity review being undertaken hopefully will be favourable to many open spaces. This review should support income generation from a wide range of sources. The Head Ranger advised the Group that he would be looking at the possibility of establishing byelaws covering Stoke Common and invited the group to give their thoughts on issues that might be addressed through any new byelaws.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – The Commons Local Risk Financial Summary

Appendix 2 – The Commons Key Data

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