

EPPING FOREST & COMMONS COMMITTEE
Thursday, 25 January 2024

Minutes of the meeting of the Epping Forest & Commons Committee held at
Committee Room - 2nd Floor West Wing, Guildhall on Thursday, 25 January 2024 at
10.00 am

Present

Members:

Benjamin Murphy (Chairman)
Caroline Haines (Deputy Chairman)
George Abrahams
Jaspreet Hodgson
Alderman Vincent Keaveny, CBE
David Sales
Philip Woodhouse
Verderer William Kennedy
Verderer Paul Morris
Verderer Nicholas Munday

In Attendance:

Andrew McMurtrie
Michael Chapman

Officers:

Emily Brennan	- Environment Department
Anna Cowperthwaite	- Comptroller & City Solicitor's
Jacqueline Eggleston	- Environment Department
Sally Gadsdon	- Environment Department
Clem Harcourt	- Chamberlain's Department
Joanne Hill	- Environment Department
Jo Hurst	- Environment Department
Simon Owen	- Chamberlain's Department
Bob Roberts	- Environment Department
Joseph Smith	- Town Clerk's Department
Blair Stringman	- Town Clerk's Department
Geoff Sinclair	- Environment Department
Paul Thomson	- Environment Department
Tristan Vetta	- Environment Department
Sonia Virdee	- Chamberlain's Department

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Gregory Lawrence.

2. MEMBERS' DECLARATIONS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT IN RESPECT OF ITEMS ON THE AGENDA

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES

RESOLVED – That, the minutes of the last meeting held on 23 November 2023 be agreed as a correct record.

4. **MATTERS ARISING**

There were no matters arising.

4.1 **Action Log**

The Committee received a report of the Town Clerk.

RESOLVED – That, the Town Clerk and Officers update the action log as appropriate.

5. **TRIPLE SSSI CONDITIONS SURVEYS**

The Committee received a verbal update of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning a presentation from Natural England.

The presentation covered the assessment of Epping Forest's condition as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) by an officer from Natural England. It was noted that Epping Forest spans 41 units, with 83% of them in favourable or recovering condition. However, challenges like air pollution, invasive species, and climate change remain. The officer emphasised the need for ongoing habitat management, data collection, and partnerships to address these challenges. The committee expressed interest in further discussions and requested a copy of the presentation slides for future reference.

A Member asked how to take conversations forward for mutually beneficial partnerships. The officer noted that there was a need to initiate discussions with potential partners, identify common goals, and explore how respective strengths and resources can complement each other to achieve those goals.

RESOLVED – That, the presentation be noted.

6. **DIRECTOR & ASSISTANT DIRECTOR UPDATE**

The Committee received a verbal update on the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning matters related to Epping Forest & The Commons.

The Director addressed staffing challenges within Epping Forest and the Commons, noting there was a focus on recruitment strategies and onboarding initiatives. Discussions highlighted the difficulty in finding suitable replacements for key roles, particularly the head of conservation, and Members were informed of efforts made to revise job descriptions to attract a more diverse pool of candidates. Concerns were raised about the timeline for resolving these staffing issues, as vacancies were causing increased damage to the forest, prompting considerations of utilising volunteers and contractors as temporary solutions.

A presentation on the Natural Capital Audit results underscored the financial value of ecosystem services provided by open spaces, while ongoing efforts to review the financial sustainability of natural environment charities were also mentioned. Members were informed that further discussions on

accommodation provisions and staffing strategies, would be brought to a future Committee meeting.

RESOLVED – That, the verbal update be noted.

7. ***NATURAL ENVIRONMENT VISION AND STRATEGIES**

The Committee received a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning the Natural Environment Vision and Strategies.

Members noted the launch of the new vision, mission, and four key strategies for the natural environment. Officers informed Members that the vision emphasises open spaces rich in diversity, conservation of nature, creating memories, and enhancing lives. Members noted that the mission aims to achieve this vision by protecting and improving 11,000 acres of open space in London and the Home Counties and four key strategic priority areas were identified: nature conservation and resilience, community engagement, access and recreation, and culture, heritage, and learning. Officers said these strategies would be shared with stakeholders soon. Additionally, officers highlighted how these plans align with broader organisational goals, including the corporate plan and business plans.

There was discussion about reviewing delivery mechanisms such as site management plans and policies to ensure alignment with the new strategies for Epping Forest & The Commons. Members also stressed the importance of accessibility and signage in public spaces like Kenley Common.

RESOLVED – That, the report be noted.

8. ***EPPING FOREST AND COMMONS PHYSICAL ACCESS DISCUSSION**

The Committee received a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning an overview of physical access issues and approaches to access for Epping Forest, Burnham Beeches and The Commons.

Officers presented an overview of physical access issues and improvements made in recent years. They highlight five areas for further effort, including improving access information, path auditing, forest path management, the principle of least restrictive access, and local access points. Committee Members discussed incorporating these proposals into action plans and management plans, ensuring ongoing review and implementation. Members also discussed focusing on utilising technology for accessibility and cautioned against endorsing standards without independent judgment.

It was suggested by a Member to include an accessibility section in each of the annual reports for the respective charities to ensure continued momentum and discussion on accessibility initiatives.

RESOLVED – That, the report be noted.

9. **LICENCES, AND PRODUCE FEES AND CHARGES FOR 2023/24 (SEF 02/24)**

The Committee considered a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning proposals for the setting of fees and charges for activities in Epping Forest for the forthcoming financial year of 2024/25.

Concerns were raised about the purpose of the fees, as outlined in the report with clarification from officers that they are not intended to generate income but rather to cover the maintenance and upkeep of Epping Forest, which is used by various bodies. Members discussed the need for thorough analysis before increasing charges, questioning whether cost increases were justified and suggesting autonomy at the local level for decision-making. The topic of placing skips on forest land also arose, with some Members advocating for charging fees to prevent dumping and others seeking further clarification on the rationale behind considering this action.

In relation to proposal 16 as outlined in the report, officers agreed to review current City of London Corporation policy on delegated powers and come back to Committee with a recommendation at a future meeting.

RESOLVED – That Members, agreed to the proposed licence fees for 2024/25 as itemised in Appendix 2 subject to the withdrawal of proposal 14 as outlined in the report.

10. ***OPERATIONAL FINANCE PROGRESS REPORT (PERIOD 9 APRIL - DECEMBER) 2023/24**

The Committee received a report of the Chamberlain concerning an update on the operational finance position as of period 9 (April – December) 2023/24.

The Chairman asked which officer was responsible for chasing down outstanding debt, officers noted this should be held with an individual, with relevant information and would additionally involve legal and finance officers. Discussion was raised on designated funds, it was noted these are being reviewed as part of the charity's review, with plans to reintegrate them into reserves.

RESOLVED – That, the report be noted.

11. **THE COMMONS: LICENCES, SPORTS, WAYLEAVES AND PRODUCE FEES AND CHARGES FOR 2024/25**

The Committee considered a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning proposals for an October 2023 Retail Price Index based increase of 6.1% in 2024/25 on charges levied for licensed activities, produce sales and formal sports and this is forecast to generate additional income of £826.

In relation to proposal 11 as outlined in the report, officers agreed to review current City of London Corporation policy on delegated powers and come back to Committee with a recommendation at a future meeting.

RESOLVED – That Members, agreed to the proposed licence fees and sports charges for 2024/25 as itemised in Appendix 2 subject to the withdrawal of proposal 11 as outlined in the report.

12. **RESOLUTION OF THANKS**

The Committee received a resolution of thanks from the Chairman to the Superintendent of Epping Forest.

RESOLVED – That Members, approve the resolution of thanks as outlined in the agenda.

13. **QUESTIONS ON MATTERS RELATING TO THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE**

A question was raised in relation to heritage assets at Epping Forest.

- Officers noted a survey undertaken which highlighted hidden and significant heritage assets, the need to analyse these assets was stressed noting that historic England had made contact to assist with this. It was noted that this would be a 1–2-year piece of work which officers were looking to progress soon.

14. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIRMAN CONSIDERS URGENT**

There was no urgent business.

15. **EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC**

RESOLVED – That, the following matters relate to business under the remit of the Court of Common Council acting for the City Corporation as charity Trustee, to which Part VA and Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 public access to meetings provisions do not apply. The following items contain sensitive information which it is not in the best interests of the charity to consider in a public meeting (engaging similar considerations as under paragraphs 3 and 5 of Schedule 12A of the 1972 Act) and will be considered in non-public session.

16. **NON-PUBLIC MINUTES**

RESOLVED – That, the non-public minutes of the meeting held on the 23 November 2023 be agreed as a correct record.

17. **MATTERS ARISING**

There were no matters arising.

17.1 **Action Log**

The Committee received a report of the Town Clerk.

RESOLVED – That, the Town Clerk and Officers update the action log as appropriate.

18. **CARBON REMOVALS (CLIMATE ACTION) PROJECT RESCOPING REAPPROVAL**

The Committee considered a joint report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment and Executive Director of Innovation and Growth.

19. **RENEWABLE ENERGY STORAGE FACILITY (SEF 24/23)**

The Committee considered a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment.

20. **REQUEST FOR THE PROVISION OF A DEED OF GRANT EASEMENT (SEF 03/24)**

The Committee considered a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment.

21. **CLIMATE ACTION STRATEGY UPDATE**

The Committee agreed to defer the item to a future meeting.

22. **NON PUBLIC QUESTIONS ON MATTERS RELATING TO THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE**

There were no questions.

23. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIRMAN CONSIDERS URGENT AND WHICH THE COMMITTEE AGREE SHOULD BE CONSIDERED WHILST THE PUBLIC ARE EXCLUDED**

There was no urgent business.

The meeting ended at 12.35pm

Chairman

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