

EPPING FOREST & COMMONS COMMITTEE
Thursday, 21 March 2024

Minutes of the meeting held at Guildhall at 10.00 am

Present

Members:

Benjamin Murphy (Chairman)
Caroline Haines (Deputy Chairman)
George Abrahams
Alderman Vincent Keaveny, CBE
Gregory Lawrence
David Sales
Verderer Michael Chapman DL
Verderer Paul Morris
Verderer William Kennedy
Verderer Nicholas Munday

Officers:

Bob Roberts	- Interim Executive Director, Environment
Julia Pridham	- Comptroller & City Solicitors
Clem Harcourt	- Chamberlains
Pauline Mouskis	- Chamberlains
Sonia Virdee	- Chamberlains
Jack Joslin	- Bridge House Estates
Jo Hurst	- Environment Department
Emily Brennan	- Environment Department
Jacqueline Eggleston	- Environment Department
Joanne Hill	- Environment Department
Geoff Sinclair	- Environment Department
Paul Thomson	- Environment Department
Tristan Vetta	- Environment Department
Abigail Tinker	- Environment Department
Rob Shakespeare	- Environment Department
Julie Mayer	- Town Clerks

1. APOLOGIES

The Chairman advised of a potential risk to the quorum, due to a couple of City of London Corporation Meetings running concurrently. Therefore, the running order on the agenda was amended to take Epping Forest business first.

Apologies were received from Alderman and Sheriff Bronek Masojada, Nicholas Lyons, Andrew McMurtrie, Jaspreet Hodgson and Philip Woodhouse

Members joining remotely

- Court of Common Council: Jaspreet Hodgson and Philip Woodhouse
- Verderers: Michael Chapman DL, William Kennedy and Nicholas Munday

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

There were no declarations

3. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED, that – the public minutes and non-public summary of the meeting held on 25th January 2024 be approved.

4. **MATTERS ARISING**

Members received the actions log and during the discussion, the following points were noted:

- a) Each minute should reference the Action Number in the log.
- b) The officer agreed to refresh the actions log to show closed actions and their conclusions. The Chairman suggested better engagement, at officer level and with partners, and that the evidence for closure or extension be presented to the Committee for approval.
- c) The officer agreed to provide an update from the City Surveyor in respect of the completion date for the Warren battery storage facility.
- d) Digital enablement at Coulsdon Common had been delayed to the Summer 2024.
- e) The Corporate Plan and 5-Year Plan would be discussed at the forthcoming Away day.

5. **DIRECTORS REPORT**

The Committee received the Director's report and noted the following data on annual benefits:

Epping Forest and buffer lands (£)

Recreation 35.7 million

Health 17.4 million

Air quality 6.1 million

Commons (£)

Carbon sequestration 4.6 million

Natural Capital Report Annual Benefits Recreation 5.8 million.

Health 2.7 million

Air Quality 1.73 million

Carbon 1.12 million.

During the discussion, the following points were noted:

- a) Monetary values for carbon credits are calculated by consultants using standard formula and SSSI status forms part of the biodiversity calculation. Members were invited to share their views on how best to use the results of the audit, which would take place every two years.

- b) The team would be looking at further opportunities, such as biodiversity credits, Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and more general funding applications to trusts and foundations, and the resulting action plan would be presented to the Committee.
- c) A new landing page for the Epping Forest and Commons Committee was being developed and this was welcomed, given the vast number of documents relevant to this Committee.
- d) The Executive Director, Chairman and Deputy Chairman thanked officers for the excellent report and media plan, noting the large amount of publicity generated and the international coverage achieved.

RESOLVED, that – the report be noted.

6. **RISK MANAGEMENT UPDATE REPORT**

The Committee considered a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment, which sought to provide the Epping Forest and Commons Committee with assurance that risk management procedures in place within the Environment Department are satisfactory and that they meet the requirements of the Corporate Risk Management Framework and the Charities Act 2011. The report noted that risk are reviewed regularly as part of the ongoing management of operations.

During the discussion, the following points were noted:

- a) The Chief Officers' Risk Management Group (CORMG) had agreed to escalate the hazardous trees risk to the Corporate Risk Register.
- b) The officer agreed to provide an update on a forthcoming meeting with the utility company in respect of the M25 closure.
- c) The Executive Director stressed that the risk register and action plans (for each risk) inform the priorities for utilising funding. Cause of risk is stated within each register and the Executive Director agreed to review the accuracy and identify any common denominators.
- d) An action had been added under 'Declining Condition of Assets Risk' and the Chairman suggested that this might benefit from a deep dive. The Chairman asked about the impact of new funding from the cyclical works programme on reducing the declining condition of assets risk and the Executive Director agreed to review this.
- e) The Committee had regularly raised concerns at the current risks score for recruitment of suitable staff and workforce planning, noting that Epping Forest has held a 40% vacancy rate for almost 3 years, and the inability to make rapid progress due to the lack of managers to perform recruitment activity, lack of HR support and an inability to attract suitable candidates from market. The Executive Director agreed to review this. Support was

being given to officers supporting vacant posts and the Director agreed to look at the Superintendent's additional work load.

- f) Whilst Warren House is not listed as 'Heritage at Risk' by Historic England, the Chairman expressed concern as to its condition. The Director agreed to look at how it is reflected in the register and advised that architect's reports and surveys are ready; once a business plan had been established.
- g) The Executive Director and Director agreed to look at where governance could be placed in the register.
- h) The Chairman suggested that the Risk Register be explored further at the forthcoming Awayday, in terms of both land ownership and future decision making/alignment with the Local Plan.

RESOLVED, that - Members of the Epping Forest and Commons Committee, acting for the City Corporation as Trustees to the five Registered Charities: ie - Epping Forest (charity number 232990), Ashtead Common (charity number 1051510), Burnham Beeches (charity number 232987), Coulsdon and Other Commons (charity number 232989) and West Wickham and Spring Park (charity number 232988) confirm that the risk registers appended to this report satisfactorily record the key risks to each of the five charities and that appropriate systems are in place to identify and mitigate risks.

7. REVIEW OF CURRENT DESIGNATED, UNRESTRICTED AND RESTRICTED INCOME FUNDS HELD AND PROPOSED CHANGES

The Committee considered a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment, which provided the complete list of the current designated, unrestricted, and restricted income funds held for Epping Forest and each of the Commons Charities, together with the recommended future usage and changes required for these funds, in order to meet charity accounting SORP rules.

In response to a question about the release of designated funds back into the unrestricted income pot, the Chamberlain confirmed that this income could not be spent until it had been re-designated by the Committee. Members noted that the ownership structure constrains how funding can be used and further guidance would be required, before seeking input from local meetings, in terms of priorities. The Chairman advised that this would be explored further at the Awayday.

RESOLVED, that:

- 1. Members of the Epping Forest and Commons Committee, acting for the City Corporation as the Conservators of Epping Forest:
 - a) Note the contents of the report as they relate to the funds of Epping Forest.

b) Approve the release of three designated income funds in Epping Forest back into the Epping Forest unrestricted income fund:

- South Lodge the Warren (Loughton Golf Course) - current balance £496,800.
- Sport Ground Deposit – current balance £4,061
- Branching Out Project – current balance £42,423

2. Members of the Epping Forest and Commons Committee, acting for the City Corporation as the Trustee of the Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common Charity, the Coulsdon and Other Commons Charity, the West Wickham and Spring Park Wood Charity and the Ashtead Common Charity, note the contents of the report as it relates to the review of the funds of those charities.

8. **EPPING FOREST - ASSISTANT DIRECTOR'S UPDATE**

The Committee received the Assistant Director's report which sought to summarise Epping Forest's progress against business plan objectives since October 2023.

During the discussion, the following points were noted:

- a) Officers had been speaking to the Police about learnings from other locations in respect of nuisance from motorcross and quad bikes, noting the limited jurisdictions in the Forest under current bylaws.
- b) A Verderer asked to be kept informed of relevant operational incidents. The Chairman advised that communications would be considered at the Awayday.
- c) A Verderer suggested that the phone-in reporting service could be improved, following specific examples of inaccurate guidance given to the public. The Chairman asked to be advised when the contract was due for renewal and the Executive Director agreed to investigate.
- d) The Chairman suggested that it would be helpful for Members to understand the CRM (complaints handling system) and relevant complaint data in future Assistant Director reports.
- e) The Countryside Stewardship Grant Scheme Award would be announced in the late summer.
- f) The Chairman commended the hard work that had gone into the recruitment drive, noting that Epping Forest had been carrying a number of vacancies.

RESOLVED, that – the report be noted.

9. **EPPING FOREST TRUSTEE'S ANNUAL REPORT AND FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2023**

The Committee received a report of the Chamberlain and the Interim Executive Director, Environment, which presented the Trustee's Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 March 2023 for Epping Forest (Charity Registration number 232990) in the format required by the Charity Commission.

In respect of this report and the other Annual Reports and Financial Statements on the agenda (at items 9, 11, 12 & 13)*, the Chairman suggested and the Executive Director and Members agreed, that a draft version of the Annual Report and Financial Statements be presented to the Epping Forest & Commons Committee for information only, before the accounts are filed with the Charity Commission, so that any amendments can be made.

RESOLVED, that – the report be noted.

10. THE COMMONS – ASSISTANT DIRECTOR'S UPDATE – OCTOBER-JANUARY 2024

The Committee received the Assistant Director's update which summarised the activities across the Commons between October 2023 and January 2024.

During the discussion, the following points were noted:

The officer time being invested in volunteers is estimated at a ratio of 1-6, which is a good benchmark.

A report on land acquisitions would be presented to the May meeting.

- a) The possibility of reintroducing the ancient tree conference was being considered for 2025, noting that the City was once a world leader in this area.
- b) The Director agreed to investigate why numbers on trees do not correspond with the ancient tree form. The Chairman noted the importance of a data strategy in resolving such queries.
- c) The Deputy Chairman suggested that it might be helpful for the Committee to receive a presentation on apprenticeships, noting how well supported they are at the City of London Corporation. Apprentices work across all departments which impact on the natural environment, providing a wide breadth of experience.
- d) The cattle grid had been delayed slightly, with completion expected by the end of April/early May. The Chairman expressed concern at the reputational risk concerning this issue and the officer gave assurance that the local community had been fully briefed.

11. *ASHTED COMMON TRUSTEE'S ANNUAL REPORT AND FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2023

The Committee received a report of the Chamberlain and the Interim Executive Director, Environment which presented the Trustee's Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 March 2023 for Ashtead Common (Charity Registration number 1051510) in the format required by the Charity Commission.

RESOLVED, that – the report be noted.

12. ***BURNHAM BEECHES AND STOKE COMMON TRUSTEE'S ANNUAL REPORT AND FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2023**

The Committee received a report of the Chamberlain and the Interim Executive Director, Environment which presented the Trustee's Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 March 2023 for Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common (Charity Registration number 232987) in the format required by the Charity Commission.

RESOLVED, that – the report be noted.

13. ***WEST WICKHAM COMMON AND SPRING PARK WOOD, COULSDON AND OTHER COMMONS TRUSTEE'S ANNUAL REPORT AND FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2023**

The Committee received a report of the Chamberlain and the Interim Executive Director, Environment which presented the Trustee's Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 March 2023 for West Wickham Common and Spring Park Wood, Coulsdon and Other Commons (charity registration numbers 232988 and 232989) in the format required by the Charity Commission.

Advice was being obtained in respect of West Wickham Common and Spring Park Wood and Coulsdon and Other Commons, and, whilst they were being reported on jointly this year, they might need to be split in future.

RESOLVED, that – the report be noted.

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

The Town Clerk agreed to investigate why agenda packs were being received late. The Chief Executive has been made aware of excessively long Committee reports, as it can be detrimental to good governance. However, this agenda pack contained a lot of statutory reports and Members have asked for as much information as possible.

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

- a) Members noted the Volunteer Day for Epping Forest on 23rd March and the recent appointment of a new Volunteer Co-ordinator.

- b) Officers would be working on the recruitment policy and how it connects into the Epping Forest Act, particularly the role and responsibilities of the Ranger.
- c) Work was underway in respect of a detailed programme and strategy for using Strategic Access Management and Monitoring (SAMM) funding.

At 11.50 am Members agreed to extend the meeting by 15 minutes to conclude the business on the agenda.

16. 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.

17. NON-PUBLIC MINUTES

RESOLVED, that – the non-public minutes of the meeting held on 24th January 2024 be approved.

18. MATTERS ARISING

Members received the actions log.

19. DIRECTORS REPORT - APPENDIX

The Committee received an non-public appendix in respect of agenda item 5

20. CORPORATE CHARITIES REVIEW SCOPING EXERCISE TO SUPPORT THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT CHARITIES REVIEW

The Committee received a report of the Managing Director, Bridge House Estates and the Interim Executive Director, Environment.

21. REVIEW OF LEARNING AND HERITAGE ACTIVITIES

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

22. COMPENSATION CLAIM

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

23. DEMOLITION OF BUILDING

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

24. ORCHARD BUNGALOWS ENTRANCEWAY LICENCE

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

25. REQUEST FOR THE PROVISION OF A DEED OF GRANT EASEMENT

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

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

There were no questions whilst the public were excluded.

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

Two items of urgent business were noted whilst the public were excluded.

The meeting ended at 12.15 pm

Chairman

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