

<b>Committee(s):</b> Epping Forest and Commons Committee – For information	<b>Dated:</b> 22/05/2024
<b>Subject:</b> The Commons – Assistant Directors Update February 2024 -March 2024	<b>Public</b>
<b>Which outcomes in the City Corporation’s Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?</b>	Flourishing public spaces Providing Excellent Services
<b>Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>If so, how much?</b>	<b>N/A</b>
<b>What is the source of Funding?</b>	
<b>Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain’s Department?</b>	<b>N/A</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Bob Roberts, Interim Executive Director Environment Department	<b>For Information</b>
<b>Report author:</b> Geoff Sinclair, Assistant Director The Commons	

### Summary

The purpose of this report is to summarise activities across The Commons between February 2024 -March 2024. Key data is presented in a dashboard format with further detail given in the main report.

Of note, volunteers contributed 4655 hours of work over the reporting period while over the year 16,770 hours of support has been given by volunteers across the Commons. A red maple tree was dedicated on March 31 to commemorate the many Canadian pilots and servicemen who died at RAF Kenley during WWII and to mark the centenary of the Royal Canadian Air Force. The fourth recruitment for the Burnham Beeches conservation officer was unsuccessful and a revised recruitment processed is being prepared.

### 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 February 2024 (period 11-24) These figures are The Commons Local Risk only and do not include non-local risk elements such as City Surveyors projects. Year-end figures which will include March 2024 were not available at the time that this report was written.

However, the year-end outturn will be reported to your Committee in July 2024 via your Committee's Revenue Outturn report for 2023/24.

2. The first table in Appendix 1 gives actual expenditure to the end of March 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 February 2024 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 (Some payments have been received in March 2024). 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):** 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. The wet weather seems to have had an impact on the first three months of the year with parking income around 80% of the average for the same period.
5. **Volunteering (Fig 4):** Volunteers undertook 4655 hours (665 seven-hour days) of work during the period, the equivalent of £46,550 using the National Lottery Heritage Fund's match funding calculator. Overall, in the twelve months since April, 16,777 volunteer hours have been given to the Commons, the equivalent of £167,770 of much appreciated 'matched funding' from local people.
6. **Volunteers at West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons:** All of the winter work has now been completed with a significant contribution from volunteers to reduce scrub across key habitats such as chalk grassland, woodland and heathland on the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons. Volunteers and Rangers have finished laying hedges at Farthing Downs, Coulsdon Common and Spring Park as part of a rotational programme of cutting and laying. Hazel coppicing has also continued with areas cleared on Kenley Common, Coulsdon Common and Spring Park. Material from coppicing has been used for stakes and binders in hedgelaying with larger offcuts of hazel stored for use in making charcoal on Kenley Common later in spring/summer.

7. Volunteers at Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common. Have been completing habitat works through February and into March with a switch to more general site maintenance tasks later in the period. The annual Stoke Common reptile survey was set up with the help of volunteers and the Friends of Stoke Common at the end of March and will run through April and May. Volunteers have also continued to be lookers for livestock grazing on sites away from Burnham Beeches.
8. At Burnham Beeches the Tuesday Eco volunteer group have started a long-term project recording trees that have important features for wildlife but are not pollards. This involved several days of planning to ensure consistency and trialling a new method of recording tree microhabitats.
9. Volunteers at Ashted Common have been repairing dead hedges, renovating notice boards and signs, and tidying entrances. They also took time out for a guided walk to view the results of their autumn and winter work, particularly the carpet of bluebells on the western boundary.
10. **Energy use and Production (Fig 2):** PV energy production was down by 4% in the period January -March on the six-year average. January was a particular good month with 45% more PV energy produced than the average for the month however February and March were especially poor production months. 6.5% more energy was used during the period (Jan to Mar) than on average. Overall, for the year Jan to Dec PV energy production was 88.2% and energy use 98.2% of the six year average,
11. **Accidents:** Accident data is given on figures 7 (Accidents by month) and 8 (Accidents by type). During the period (Jan to March) we had no reported accidents and the Figure 7 shows the average figures only

### **Additional Important Updates**

#### Rural Payments Agency Independent Agricultural Appeals Panel

12. Following the verbal update at the January EF&CC by the Assistant Director we are still waiting for the DEFRA Minister's reconsideration of our appeal. The Assistant Director has sent a letter to the RPA reminding them of the need to respond to a number of specific queries that we still need answered.

#### Events and educational activities

13. In March the annual 'Meet the Calves' event at the Merlewood Estate Office on Coulsdon Common was held with approximately 300 people passing through the barn to see the newborn Sussex calves. A large number of Rangers and volunteers were on hand to speak with visitors about the importance of conservation grazing on the Coulsdon Commons with displays on its value for wildlife. Two fire and food events were held at Kenley Common during the February half term where families could learn fire starting and woodland skills. The Riddlesdown Ranger has been continuing with hosting monthly volunteer tasks on the Common in partnership with the Riddlesdown Collegiate for students with special educational needs and disabilities. Tasks have included scrub clearance, coppicing and helping to maintain footpaths and rights of way.
14. At Burnham Beeches events have include family orientated half-term and easter trails. The Bucks Fungus Group organised a training day for staff, volunteers and some of their own members to highlight the work they have carried out under the receipt of a central fund grant. An air quality webinar was hosted by Plantlife about the work carried out in Burnham Beeches under a s106 grant from Slough power station. Presentations included one from a Burnham Beeches volunteer who has been leading on some work on lichens and air quality. Officers have attended workshops as part of the local nature recovery strategy (LNRS) in Bucks.

#### Licences

15. No updates

#### Recruitment and Apprentices

16. Across the Commons we have 3 roles currently vacant, representing 9% of the staff resource. Support Services Officers at Ashted Common and West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons and Conservation Ranger (Ecology) at West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons. In addition, we are looking at recruiting an apprentice for Ashted Common.
17. The fourth round of recruitment for the Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common Conservation Officer was unsuccessful. At the time of writing the way forward was being reviewed.

#### Training and Development

18. The Conservation Officer led two sessions of training to help staff who were intending to sit VETCert exams. Happily, both staff members passed these very challenging exams.

19. A ranger at Ashtead Common successfully applied for Apprentice Levy Funding to study for a level three qualification in leadership and management.
20. All team members for the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons attended a refresher course in conflict management and personal safety. Two Rangers attended a 3-day refresher course for chainsaw operation, cross cutting and small felling with rangers from Ashtead Common

## Livestock

21. The main herd of Sussex cattle at WWCC have finished calving in March with 17 new calves. Since mid-April, the herd were moved from the barn to graze Woodplace Farm Field and Tollers on Farthing Downs and New Hill. Two smaller herds of Sussex cattle have been grazing areas of species-rich grassland since January utilising the NoFence satellite fencing on Kenley Common and Farthing Downs. The goats have been removed from the main section of the Riddlesdown Quarry ahead of the first chalk grassland wildflowers emerging and will be temporarily staying in a smaller grazing area on the top of the Quarry until they come back to the Merlewood Estate yard for spring/summer.
22. 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 Exmoor ponies are also at their winter quarters at Teikyo School on licenced grazing fields.

## Project work

23. At Ashtead Common a remote water quality sensing device has been installed at the surface water outlet into the Rye Brook to monitor pollution. This information will supply baseline data for a reedbed project to tackle pollution from a surface water drainage network that discharges into the Rye Brook.
24. The Ashtead team are working with South East Rivers Trust to work up a bid to develop the reedbed project using funding from the Water Restoration Fund – the money collected from fines issued to water companies. The fund for the Thames Water region has £3.3m available. If successful, there will be a year to develop the design to a level sufficient to submit a grant application to implement the project if this, or any other, funding stream becomes available again.
25. Temporary electric stock fencing has been installed at Farthing Downs once again to help prevent disturbance to ground breeding skylark from dogs and predators such as foxes. The Rangers have been trialling this since 2021 alongside a poster campaign to raise awareness among visitors who come to the downs with dogs for which the response has been positive and encouraging from the local

community. In 2023, we recorded two breeding skylark pairs within the enclosure.

26. A red maple tree was dedicated on March 31 to commemorate the many Canadian pilots and servicemen who died at RAF Kenley during WWII and to mark the centenary of the Royal Canadian Air Force. Planted at the entrance to Kenley Common near to the RAF Tribute, the tree was donated by the family of Wing Commander Hugh C. Godefroy (DSO, DFC & Bar, Croix de Guerre with Gold Star), who served as Kenley's Wing Leader during the second half of 1943. During the short service, speeches were given from Colonel Johnathan Bouchard (Air Advisor to the High Commission of Canada). Reverend Annie Kurk (Whyteleafe and Chaldon churches), cadets from 450 Kenley Squadron Air Cadets and Linda Duffield (Kenley Revival).
27. In addition to the tree planting, there is a circular information trail around the airfield fence with boards providing details of the Canadians who served and sadly lost their lives at Kenley. This trail will run until Remembrance season in November. Both events were largely organised by the Kenley Revival volunteers with support from the Ranger team.

#### Survey and monitoring.

28. At the Epping Forest and Commons Committee on the 11 September 2017 Members requested that annualised Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs) figures are presented to the Committee each year. These are given in Appendix 3. The number of breaches reported increased in 2023-24 however this is coincident with the start of the new Community Engagement Rangers who have a responsibility to monitor for these. Most breaches of the PSPOs were not deliberate or repeat offences and were simply dealt with by the Ranger team through explanation and information. The long-term trend has been for a reduction in breaches observed.

#### Consultative Committees

29. Nothing to report.

#### **Appendices**

Appendix 1 – The Commons Local Risk Financial Summary

Appendix 2 – The Commons Key Data

Appendix 3 - Annual report of activity in relation to Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPO) Activity at Burnham Beeches

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