

<b>Committee(s):</b> Epping Forest and Commons Committee – For information	<b>Dated:</b> 28/11/2024
<b>Subject:</b> The Commons – Assistant Directors Quarterly Update July to Sept 2024	<b>Public</b>
<b>Which outcomes in the City Corporation’s Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flourishing public spaces</li> <li>• Leading sustainable development</li> </ul>
<b>Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>If so, how much?</b>	<b>NA</b>
<b>What is the source of Funding?</b>	
<b>Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain’s Department?</b>	<b>NA</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Katie Stewart, Executive Director Environment	<b>For Information</b>
<b>Report author:</b> Geoff Sinclair, Assistant Director, The Commons	

### Summary

The purpose of this report is to present key data for Burnham Beeches and The Commons for the period July 2024 -Sept 2024. The report is in a revised format and is still being developed to more closely align reporting to Business Plan outcomes. Finance and risk reporting is being undertaken through separate reports.

Of note, through 120 activity sessions 664 volunteers contributed 3443.5 hours of support, slightly above average for the period. Work commenced on the installation of leaky dams as part of the Climate Action Strategy agreed programme for Ashtead Common where the first of six new image boards – made from Ashtead oak – has been installed. The upgraded sensory trail was launched at Burnham Beeches by the Lord Mayor Professor Michael Mainelli on the 26th September 2024.

Management plan implementation is progressing as planned with volunteer works focused on scrub and bracken management, path and site infrastructure maintenance including the management of fire belts at Ashtead Common. No accidents were reported during the period and for the first time in over a decade evidence of possible dormouse activity was identified in the Coulsdon Commons.

### Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- Note the report.

## **Main Report**

### **Current Position**

1. This quarterly report format and content has been amended to align the reporting with the objectives of the Business Plan currently being produced for the period 2025-2030. The revised reporting process is still being developed and further refinements will be forthcoming.
2. The revised report structure provides a breakdown of activity in Appendix 1 with summary details and key points highlighted in the following report. The figures in brackets, e.g. '1.2.5' refer to the relevant sections in Appendix 1.

### **Progress against Business Plan objectives for the period July – September 2024**

#### **Nature Conservation and Resilience**

3. Practical habitat management activity included:

##### 3.1 At Ashtead Common:

- i. Firebreak maintenance (1.2.5)
- ii. Pond management
- iii. Hay making/grassland management.

##### 3.2 At the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons:

- i. Charcoal making
- ii. Coppicing
- iii. Scrub clearance on chalk grassland
- iv. Path maintenance
- v. Heathland creation
- vi. Scheduled monument maintenance.

##### 3.3 At Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common:

- iv. American grey squirrel management (1.2.4)
- v. Invasive species control (rhododendron, azalea, crassula, snowberry, cherry laurel)
- vi. Approx 300 metres of stock fence replaced with volunteer support
- vii. Habitat mowing work at Stoke Common and Burnham Beeches
- viii. Grazing across Burnham Beeches with No Fence and traditional fences (ponies & cattle)
- ix. Grazing across Stoke Common with traditional and electric fences (ponies & cattle).

4. Conservation activity highlights of the period were:

4.1 Installation of the first of 16 leaky dams on Ashtead Common (1.2.2).

4.2 Three public dormouse nut hunts covered woodlands across the Coulsdon Commons (Riddlesdown and Kenley Common). Possible activity of dormouse

was found for the first time in over a decade. Formal surveys will follow in the following seasons.

### **Community Engagement**

5. Over the quarter 20 local community groups and institutions were worked with involving over 460 people. Groups included schools and youth groups such as Cubs and brownies, running and local history clubs. 18 students from Oxford Brookes University MSc Conservation course were hosted at Burnham Beeches while at Ashted Common 5 school students were hosted for work experience sessions and a Conservation graduate has been working as a volunteer with the team to build up their practical conservation work portfolio (2.2.1, 2.4.1, 2.4.4, 2.5.2).
6. The Community Engagement Rangers at Burnham Beeches over the period have had a focus on mitigation monitoring with the support of the eco-volunteer team, cow wheat and pincushion moss surveys have been completed plus an assessment of the impact of visitors on the main common vegetation. A whole team patrol day was organised where additional rangers from Burnham Beeches joined the CERs on patrol. A summer engagement week (end of July –August) was run with enhanced patrolling and a series of events including the Stoke Common Horticultural Show, Waggy Walks, The Secret World of Trees, Burnham Park Sensory Walk and pop-up nature games with our new Engagement Trike along with a several practical mitigation educational tasks to help our visitors protect Burnham Beeches and feel more connected to nature (2.5.3).
7. Across the estate the following visits were hosted to share experience: (3.3.2, 3.4.1,3.4.3).

#### **7.1 At Ashted Common:**

- i. Hosted a visit by the River Mole and Rye working group, part of the River Mole Catchment Partnership. The Head Ranger also attended the Wey and Mole Catchment Partnerships conference.
- ii. Natural England tree team visit.

#### **7.2 At the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons:**

- i. Rangers held two practical volunteer sessions with support from Sustrans to restore and refresh a wildflower area at Kenley Station. This involved 13 new volunteers who helped clear and reseed this area with chalk grassland wildflowers using financial support from the City's Natural Environment Fund to Enjoy our Open Spaces.
- ii. Kenley Revival Volunteers hosted the family of Canadian ex-servicemen who served at RAF Kenley on a guided tour.
- iii. Site tour of Riddlesdown with 25 secondary school children from the Riddlesdown Collegiate to learn about conservation on the Common.

- iv. Rangers gave talks to the Kenley Residents Association about site management and community involvement and a presentation at the Chaldon History Society focusing on the history of Farthing Downs.

## **Access and Recreation**

### 8. Entrance signage project: (3.2.1)

8.1 The first of six new image boards, made from Ashtead oak, has been installed.

8.2 A Procurement package to replace the byelaw boards/entrance signs across the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons is progressing with an aim to go out for tender in November.

- 9. The production of a Sustainable Access Strategy is a requirement of the Bucks Sustainable Access Monitoring and Management Project. A first draft report was prepared by the consultants working on this and comments submitted by officers during the reporting period with a second draft report due in October (3.1.1).
- 10. The upgraded sensory trail was launched at Burnham Beeches by the Lord Mayor Professor Michael Mainelli on the 26<sup>th</sup> September 2024. This included the installation of new chainsaw carvings along the trail supported by QR codes which direct users to online interpretation resources about different species that make Burnham Beeches their home (3.2.2).

## **Learning and Heritage**

- 11. Learning and Heritage across Burnham Beeches and the City Commons is focussed on practical engagement of the community in the care of the open spaces to promote a sense of ownership of the spaces and improved personal wellbeing of the participants and community generally.
- 12. Over the quarter through 120 activity sessions 664 volunteers contributed 3443.5 hours of support, slightly above average for the period. In addition to practical conservation tasks activity included (1.1.4.5):
  - 12.1 At Ashtead Common:
    - i. Work experience provided for a countryside graduate.
    - ii. Breeding bird and butterfly surveys.
    - iii. Assisting with Heritage Open Day event (Roman tile making).
    - iv. Refurbishment of sign boards and installation of a new image board.
    - v. Tool maintenance.
  - 12.2 At the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons:
    - i. Leading four fungal forays across the Commons engaging 100+ visitors in fungi ecology.

- ii. Clearing around the WWII fighter pens on Kenley Common in preparation for the Remembrance season and services in November.
- iii. Assisting the rangers with two guided storytelling events engaging 80+ children and parents.

#### 12.3 At Burnham Beeches:

- vi. Infrastructure repairs and maintenance especially fence and path maintenance, eight sessions.
- vii. Supporting the CERs on visitor impact mitigation works and event preparation.
- viii. Admin support (much appreciated).
- ix. Ecological monitoring.

### **Income Generation**

13. Car parking income data for the period was not available for the car parks at WWCC and will therefore be reported at the January 2025 Committee meeting. At Burnham Beeches £34,777 was received over the quarter which is 3% down on the four-year average. Overall, for the first half of the year Burnham Beeches is 4% down on the four-year average which it is thought to be related to the poor weather conditions over this period deterring people from visiting. The annual income target for car parking income at Burnham Beeches is £140,000.

### **People Management**

14. A new Support Services Officer started at Ashted Common in August.
15. A new second apprentice has started a Level 2 Apprenticeship programme with the Coulsdon Commons team. She will be developing skills as a Countryside Ranger alongside formal education at Sparsholt College (4.3.4).
16. One member of staff has started a 12-month secondment in the position of Conservation Ranger/Ecologist with the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons team. This will allow a greater focus on developing a monitoring programme for recording biological data and improving our engagement with the local planning system. Their former role of Information Ranger/Comms position will still be maintained during this time.
17. The new Conservation Officer for Burnham Beeches took up their post on the 5<sup>th</sup> September 2024. There is a three-month handover process underway with a phased transfer of tasks from the soon to retire former CO.
18. We have had no reported accidents during this quarter.

### **Conclusion**

19. A revised Assistant Director report has been presented that is under development and will focus on reporting on the Business Plan and Natural Environment Department Management Strategies outcomes.

20. Management Plan implementation is progressing as planned. Over the period we had no reported accidents. Community support through volunteering remains high and above average for the period. We have successfully recruited to one post during the period with currently two vacancies looking to be filled.

## **Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Progress against key objectives / actions (categorised by Natural Environment Strategy).

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