

EPPING FOREST & COMMONS COMMITTEE
Thursday, 28 November 2024

Minutes of the meeting of the Epping Forest & Commons Committee held at
Committee Room - 2nd Floor West Wing, Guildhall on Thursday, 28 November 2024
at 10.00 am

Present

Members:

Benjamin Murphy (Chairman)
Caroline Haines (Deputy Chairman)
George Abrahams
Jaspreet Hodgson
Alderman Vincent Keaveny, CBE
Alderman Sir Nicholas Lyons
Alderman Bronek Masojada
Eamonn Mullally (Ex-Officio Member)
David Sales
Philip Woodhouse

In Attendance:

Verderer William Kennedy
Verderer Paul Morris

Officers:

Connie Dale	- Chamberlain's Department
Clem Harcourt	- Chamberlain's Department
Simon Owen	- Chamberlain's Department
Richard Skok	- Chamberlain's Department
Anna Cowperthwaite	- Comptroller and City Solicitor's
Emily Brennan	- Environment Department
Jacqueline Eggleston	- Environment Department
Joanne Hill	- Environment Department
Jo Hurst	- Environment Department
Geoff Sinclair	- Environment Department
Katie Stewart	- Executive Director, Environment
Heinz Traut	- Environment Department

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Verderer Nicholas Munday.

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

No declarations were made.

3. MINUTES

3.1 **Draft Minutes of the Epping Forest & Commons Committee held on 19 September 2024**

RESOLVED – That, the public minutes and the non-public summary of the meeting held on 19 September 2024.

3.2 ***Informal Note of the Epping Forest & Commons Committee held on 19 September 2024**

RESOLVED – To note the contents of the note.

4. MATTERS ARISING

4.1 **Action Log**

The Committee received the Action Log and, during the discussion the following points were noted:

- a) Officers reported, with regard to Action 2022-1: The Lodges: Income Generation, that a project team had been established to prioritise the backlog of work. Officers stated they would provide a regular update in the Assistant Director's report at each Committee meeting going forward. The Committee agreed to close the Action.
- b) Officers stated, on Action 2023-2: Target Operating Model Review, that vacancies were being filled following TOM process to ensure new managers were in place before a team was recruited and there had been some delay due to the Ambition 25 project which itself had been delayed. Officers informed they would seek to tweak job descriptions rather than introduce wholesale changes.
- c) The Chairman indicated he wanted to see an update on SAMS income and what that meant for hiring staff to support the community ranger aspect that had worked in The Commons.
- d) It was noted by Officers that there had been a delay in recruiting a permanently funded access and development manager which would look at strategic access across the Forest, but would look to carry out a large advertisement in January to recruit for roles.
- e) The Chairman requested an update to ensure there had been good progress on the TOM and whether apprenticeships were being embedded into the team.
- f) Officers, in reference to Action 2024-7: Funding, informed Committee that a BNG consultant had been appointed and a Member working group

would be established on income generation to support officers in progressing work. Officers also stated they would be looking to appoint a fundraising consultant as part of Natural Environment Charity Review on a fixed-term basis.

RECEIVED.

5. ***PRESENTATION FROM THE FIELD STUDIES COUNCIL**

The Committee received a presentation from the Field Studies Council.

During the discussion, the following points were made:

- a) Members asked how the Field Studies Council marketed itself. Helen Robertson noted that word-of-mouth positive experiences were valuable and informed the Committee there was an 80% re-booking rate. The Council also had a dedicated market team, and they noted that one of the challenges was getting into schools who were interested in the Council's work.
- b) It was suggested by a Member that the Field Studies Council may want to look toward organisations supported through the Lord Mayor's Appeal previously, most notably youth centres.
- c) The Committee queried where the Epping Forest Centre sat in relation to the national offering. Helen Robertson explained it was one of the leading centres and a lot of the work that had been done at that site had been used to support work in other places and their experience in delivering day business to a diverse group of people in short lengths of time was a significant contribution to the whole Council.
- d) A Member warned there was a danger of the organisation being forgotten post-Covid and it was important the Committee listened to the Council regarding investment needed.
- e) It was queried whether the Education Board, and the City of London schools, were well acquainted with the correct person from the Council to speak to.
- f) The Committee discussed whether the Council engaged with the Livery Companies as they could sponsor rooms for relatively modest amounts to produce some recurring income. Helen Robertson indicated this was a good idea and wanted to discuss it further.
- g) A question was raised as to how many students at the study centre came from socio-economic groups D&E. Helen Robertson explained she did not have detailed data on the breakdown of customers due to the way bookings were received from school which made it difficult to obtain information on individual attendees. However, data could be used for the school and treated as an assumption across their groups.

- h) A Member queried if any field testing had been done in relation to Artificial Intelligence (AI), especially in external environments. Helen Robertson confirmed field testing had not been done yet.
- i) The Chairman indicated a need for governance arrangements to be addressed as there was an agreement and an operational model that was not well documented for the present day and the Committee needed to understand how issues were reported and prioritised by Committee, and whether they were funded through CWP or capital funding.
- j) The Chairman also expressed the need for a clear escalation process for the Committee to decide next steps and suggested it would be beneficial to involve a few Members in the conversation about livery funding and other income streams for the Council.
- k) It was raised by the Chairman that there was a need to consider how to integrate the Field Studies Council's need for visitors into the forest transport strategy that was currently being worked on with the FDC and that there was a need to address areas based on data provided regarding where visitors were coming from to avoid coaches continually entering and leaving the SAC.
- l) The Deputy Chair indicated there was much more scope for a more proactive link between the education unit and the environmental learning unit and suggested a targeted pack of information could go to the eighteen City of London schools, as well as associated schools.
- m) The Deputy Chair noted that schools within the City Schools family could now apply for partnership and strategic funding for outdoor activities and any school could request transport assistance for visits to City-owned sites through the visits fund.

6. ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Committee received a report which included the Terms of Reference for the Committee's consideration before submission to the Policy and Resources Committee.

During the discussion, the following points were made:

- a) The Chairman expressed concerns that the Terms of Reference, in relation to paragraph 4, did not also refer to the overall policy laid down by the Court of Common Council and other committees that were relevant to making policy decisions.
- b) The Chairman also indicated a need for a reference to the Charity Commission's guidance in relation to trustee decision making and conflicts of interest. However, the Chairman indicated the Natural Environment Charities Review would cover these issues in due course.

RESOLVED – That, Members:

- Approved the terms of reference of the Epping Forest & Commons Committee, subject to the above comments, for submission to the Court of Common Council in April 2025, and that any further changes required in the lead up to the Court's appointment of Committees be delegated to the Town Clerk in consultation with the Chairman and Deputy Chair.

7. *ASSISTANT DIRECTOR EPPING FOREST UPDATE REPORT, JULY - SEPT 2024 (SEF 18/24)

The Committee received a report which presented key information on business activity aligned to objectives for Epping Forest for the period July 2024 – September 2024.

During the discussion, the following points were made:

- a) Officers reported that calving was taking place with thirty successful births so far and another eight to come.
- b) A Member sought an update on the TOM2 and staff survey feedback. Officers explained they had considered responses and pulled together an action plan which looked at improved communications, regular training, and development.
- c) Officers indicated informal feedback they had received since action had been taken, following the staff survey, indicated a significant improvement in morale over the last year and noted the TOM process had led to an increase in staff. The Chairman highlighted work done by Officers on inductions and positive changes to the workplace environment.
- d) Concerns were raised by Members on the increase in fly tipping. The Chairman informed the Committee pressure had been placed on local authorities to remove barriers to using recycling centres and tips and noted there was a joint bid for funding for CCTV with Essex Police at specific hotspots.
- e) A Member suggested reviewing the impact of filming at Epping Forest. Officers told the Committee they were currently working on a Natural Environment-wide filming policy and would come back to the Committee with an update. The Chairman queried if there was a final deadline earmarked. Officers indicated it was likely to be in Q1.
- f) A query was raised on what outcomes had been achieved as a result of current policy toward rough sleeping and drug use at Wanstead Flats. Officers explained the keepers, the enforcement team and the street scene team had cleared camps and the Metropolitan Police had been conducting drop-ins to encourage dispersal which was making it

gradually more difficult for the camps to settle. Officers indicated they were signposting vulnerable people to relevant agencies and forward care.

- g) A Member questioned what opportunities there were for metrics or key performance indicators (KPIs) that demonstrated trends and competing priorities. Officers stated that a revised business plan would come to Committee in January and explained Officers were trying to analyse what staff and funding resource was being used and more detail would come in the project prioritisation report.
- h) The Chairman indicated he encouraged senior Officers to work from some of the Open Spaces as it would assist with understanding issues on the ground. Officers noted discussions were underway at the wider extended leadership board for buddying up at sites and was keen to see other Officers visit the sites.
- i) The Chairman highlighted the need for a standalone website if the charity was serious about sharing visitor information and key data from decisions, as well as engaging with the public to release efficiencies for issue reporting. He also noted there had been agreement for a working group to discuss building that going forward.

RESOLVED – To note the contents of the report.

8. **EPPING FOREST AND COMMONS PROJECT PRIORITISATION (SEF19/24)**

The Committee received a report which provided a summary of proposed projects and workstreams for Epping Forest and The Commons' respective business plans with the results of a prioritisation exercise to determine which projects should be prioritised above others.

During the discussion, the following points were made:

- a) In relation to Epping Forest, the Chairman indicated that feedback from stakeholder groups on priorities did not match the key workstreams reflected in the prioritisation outcomes, and queried how the user voice was being considered. Officers explained the projects highlighted in blue were priorities identified by the Epping Forest Consultative Group (EFCG) and did not score as highly when they were applied to the prioritisation matrix. Further work was needed to pull out genuine priorities taking a range of relevant factors into account.
- b) Officers noted that the prioritisation matrix would pull out a lot of communication and community-based projects as they hit a number of categories under the Natural Environment strategies. Officers assured they would carry out more work on priorities alongside the development of the business plan.

- c) Officers from The Commons indicated there were several projects that had been discussed on site visits that had not gone through formal committee processes yet, but were in the matrix and were largely focussed on income generation opportunities for Coulsdon Commons.
- d) The Chairman emphasised the need to build on the work done on the Natural Environment strategies and there was also a need to build in site specific issues to ensure additive work was not just prioritised over mandatory maintenance work that should be prioritised.
- e) A Member requested information on how conclusions and data was prepared with regard to the project prioritisation process.
- f) Another Member drew attention to the proposed review on horse riding at Epping Forest, and stated that horse riders caused less damage than cyclists. It was suggested that consideration be given to whether cyclists needed to pay to access the Forest.
- g) The Chairman noted that the issue of charges had been looked at previously over the years and it had been considered whether payment for a license for horse riding should still be occurring as it did not raise a significant amount of income.
- h) The Chairman explained it would be difficult to agree practically how to regulate the licensing of cyclists at Epping Forest as the appropriate resources were not available currently and noted there was work to be done on education around the charity's sites and involving technology in that was important.
- i) The Deputy Chair stated Officers were collecting responses from the EFCG as to how it would be repurposed and suggested that issues such as cycling could be addressed through that forum as Group members could disseminate information through the local neighbourhood.
- j) A Member stated while it would be difficult to monitor cyclists, they felt that many would not use cycles if they were not allowed to do so and those who did would use them responsibly if a license was in place. The Member also suggested a review of cycling was needed.
- k) Attention was drawn to the improved signage around the Hill Forts at Epping Forest and a Member was pleased to report it had made a significant difference and suggested this was an approach that could be taken with cyclists.
- l) The Chairman indicated the Committee did not wish to approve the final product of the project prioritisation process as it stood as it needed to come back to Committee but could approve the direction of travel.

RESOLVED – That, acting for and on behalf of the City Corporation in its capacity as Conservators of Epping Forest and Trustee of the Epping Forest Charity, Members:

- Endorsed the direction of travel of the prioritisation exercise for Epping Forest and requested that the project prioritisation process report and recommendations for workstreams return to Committee at a later date for formal approval.
- Noted the Epping Forest Consultative Group prioritisation polling results included in Appendix 2.

That, acting for and on behalf of the City Corporation in its separate capacity as Trustee for each of the Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common Charity, Ashted Common Charity, Coulsdon and other Commons Charity, and West Wickham Common and Spring Park Wood Charity, Members:

- Endorsed the direction of travel of the prioritisation exercise as relevant to each of the above-mentioned charities and requested that the project prioritisation process report and recommendations for workstreams return to Committee at a later date for formal approval.
- Noted the existing workstreams for The Commons set out in Appendix 3, which have not been included within the project prioritisation process.

9. **RISK MANAGEMENT UPDATE**

The Committee received a report which was presented to provide it 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.

RESOLVED – That, Members confirmed, on behalf of the City Corporation as Trustee of each charity as relevant, that the Summary Risk Registers appended to the report satisfactorily identified the key risks to each of the charities and that appropriate systems were in place to effectively identify and mitigate risks.

10. ***FINANCE PROGRESS REPORT 2024/25 (PERIOD 6 APRIL – SEPTEMBER) – EPPING FOREST CHARITY**

The Committee received a report which provided an update on the finance position as at Period 6 (April – September) 2024/25 for the Epping Forest charity and sets out the charity's revenue operating budget position to date and projected year-end outturn, current live capital projects and outstanding debt position. The report also provided additional information on the various reserve funds held and other finance information relevant to the charity.

During the discussion, the following points were made:

- a) The Chairman noted that the Natural Environment Charities Review would make recommendations to change how the budgeting process was looked at.

- b) The Chairman also noted that there was a significant amount of self-funding of the charity and it was making progress on income-raising solutions.
- c) The Chairman indicated that Members wanted more oversight and decision-making on unallocated, restricted funds and hoped, through the project prioritisation and business planning, that the charity could start to make some of those decisions more clearly.

RESOLVED – To note the contents of the report.

11. ***THE COMMONS – ASSISTANT DIRECTOR'S QUARTERLY UPDATE, JULY TO SEPT 2024**

The Committee received a report which presented key data for Burnham Beeches and The Commons for the period July 2024 – September 2024. The report was in a revised format and was still being developed to more closely align reporting to Business Plan outcomes. Finance and risk reporting was being undertaken through separate reports.

During the discussion, the following points were made:

- a) Officers informed that the recent storm did not cause a significant amount of damage and Kenley was the most impacted as quite a few paths had to be closed, and Burnham Beeches also had to be closed for two days due to wind speeds.
- b) Officers also noted that the rural payments dispute had been concluded.
- c) The Chairman noted that the Natural Environment Charities Review would look at how decisions would be taken for some of the Commons charities and consider potential options for amalgamation if that was the preferred outcome.
- d) The Chairman highlighted the local authority was active engaging with the Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common charity on questions and consultations and stated that the Leader of the Council spoke in detail at the Lord Mayor's visit to Burnham Beeches on the impact of planning legislation and issues on Burnham Beeches.
- e) The Chairman confirmed that the visit to Burnham Beeches and lunch at Dorneywood would take place on 24 September 2025.
- f) Officers confirmed that a venue for the Ancient Tree Conference had been secured and the conference would take place on the 25th and 26th June 2025.

- g) A Member asked for the dates to be added to Outlook calendars as soon as possible. The Chairman confirmed that would be followed-up with the Town Clerk.

RESOLVED – To note the contents of the report.

12. ***FINANCE PROGRESS REPORT 2024/25 (PERIOD 6 APRIL - SEPTEMBER) - THE COMMONS CHARITIES**

The Committee received a report which provided an update on the finance position as at Period 6 (April and September) 2024/25 for each of the Commons charities and set out each charity's revenue operating budget position to date and projected year-end outturn, current live capital projects and outstanding debt position. It also provided additional information on the various reserve funds held and other relevant finance information.

During the discussion, the following points were made:

- a) The Chairman highlighted the reduction in outstanding debts over 120 days.

RESOLVED – To note the contents of the report.

13. **SURREY HILLS AONB BOUNDARY EXTENSION PROPOSALS – 2ND CONSULTATION**

The Committee received a report which proposed that the City Corporation supported Natural England's recommendation to include Woodplace Farm Field and New Hill in the Surrey Hills National Landscape (SHNL) with a closing date for comments being 10 December 2024.

During the discussion, the following points were made:

- a) The Chairman drew attention to an expected decision by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) on reduction of funding to the Natural Landscapes and stated when the report on the potential inclusion of Farthing Downs in the AONB was first brought to Committee, one of the benefits of having a relationship with the AONB was considered to be improved access to external grant funding.
- b) The Chairman noted there were other benefits to AONB inclusion, such as access to work at the landscape scale and the access to the expertise and collaboration.
- c) The Chairman suggested the DEFRA decision would likely lead to staff being cut from the National Landscapes teams. Officers agreed and added that the nature of the funding climate meant that the more it could be shown the charities were helping to deliver national priorities, the more helpful that was likely to be to the charities in accessing relevant external grant funding.

RESOLVED – That, Members:

- Supported the inclusion of Woodplace Farm Field and New Hill in the proposed Happy Valley extension to the Surrey Hills AONB (Option 2);
- Authorised the Executive Director, Environment to respond to Natural England’s consultation process on the proposed extension of the Surrey Hills AONB.

14. *REPORT OF ACTION TAKEN

The Committee received a report which provided details of decisions taken under Urgency Procedures (Standing Order 41a) between Committee meetings.

RESOLVED – To note the contents of the report.

15. QUESTIONS ON MATTERS RELATING TO THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE

No questions were received relating to the work of the Committee.

16. ANY OTHER BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIRMAN CONSIDERS URGENT

The Chairman informed the Committee that a formal request would be made to invite Natural England to provide a presentation at the meeting in January on the Sites of Special Scientific Interest condition assessments.

17. 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.

18. NON-PUBLIC MINUTES

18.1 Draft Non-Public Minutes of the Epping Forest & Commons Committee held on 19 September 2024

RESOLVED – That, the non-public minutes of the meeting held on 19 September 2024 were approved as a correct record.

18.2 *Informal Non-Public Note of the Epping Forest & Commons Committee held on 19 September 2024

RESOLVED – To note the contents of the note.

19. ***UPDATE ON RANGERS JUBILEE - VERBAL UPDATE**

The Committee received a verbal presentation from the Superintendent of Epping Forest.

20. ***VERBAL PRESENTATION ON INSURANCE CLAIMS MANAGEMENT REPORTS**

The Committee received a verbal presentation from the Superintendent of Epping Forest.

21. **CARBON REMOVALS PROJECT – GREY SQUIRREL SURVEYS & PINE MARTEN STUDY (SEF 20/24)**

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

22. **THE GROTTO, WANSTEAD PARK RESTORATION 2024-26**

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

23. ***REPORT OF ACTION TAKEN - NON-PUBLIC**

The Committee received a report of the Town Clerk.

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

There were no non-public questions on matters relating to the work of the Committee.

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

Five items of other business were considered that the Chairman considered urgent and of which the Committee agreed should be considered whilst the public were excluded.

The meeting ended at 12.16 pm

Chairman

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