

City of London Corporation Committee Report

Committee(s): Epping Forest and Commons Committee	Dated: 29/05/2025
Subject: The Condition of Epping Forest Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) (SEF 09/25)	Public report: For Information
This proposal: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• delivers Corporate Plan 2024-29 outcomes• provides statutory duties	Leading Sustainable Environment, Flourishing Public Spaces, Diverse Engaged Communities
Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?	No
If so, how much?	N/A
What is the source of Funding?	N/A
Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain's Department?	N/A
Report of:	Katie Stewart, Executive Director Environment
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Summary

This report summarises Epping Forest's Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) condition assessments and provides updates to your committee on assessments completed in 2024 and those proposed for 2025-2028. Natural England is responsible for carrying out these assessments of SSSI feature condition with the objective to achieve 'favourable condition' status for all SSSIs.

In 2023 Government set a long-term commitment to have 75% of SSSIs in favourable condition by 2042 under the Environmental Improvement Plan (published in 2023 in accordance with the Environment Act 2021, as the first revision to the 25 Year Environment Plan published in 2018). Two interim targets were also set for SSSIs to be achieved by the end of January 2028, these were:

- To have an up-to-date condition assessment for every SSSI
- To have actions on-track to achieve favourable condition on 50% of SSSI features by 2028.

In 2023 Natural England changed their approach to SSSI monitoring, they now assess the condition of special features across the whole of a SSSI, rather than using SSSI units. The SSSI feature condition status for Epping Forest as of April 2025 is:

- Favourable – 12 features (46.15%).

- Unfavourable Recovering – 2 features (7.69%).
- Unfavourable No Change – 2 features (7.69%).
- Not Recorded – 10 (38.46%).

In 2024 three SSSI features were assessed and their condition status updated:

- Lowland dry heath reported as unfavourable recovering (no change from previous assessment).
- Lowland wet heath reported as unfavourable recovering (no change from previous assessment).
- Population of *Zygodon forsterii* reported as favourable (an improvement from unfavourable recovering).

In 2025 two SSSI features will be assessed, these include lowland dry acid grassland types U1 and U4. Further SSSI feature assessment surveys will progress from 2025/2026 to 2028. Many of the condition assessment surveys require specialist surveys to be carried out.

Staff continue to work closely with colleagues at Natural England to ensure appropriate management brings the remaining Epping Forest SSSI features into 'Favourable' condition.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- Note the report and the change to the SSSI monitoring approach, the condition assessments and updates from 2024 and the proposed condition assessment monitoring for 2025-2028.

Main Report

Background

1. The last SSSI condition assessment report submitted to Committee was September 2015 (SEF 41/15). Refer to Appendix 1 for a summary of the 2015 Committee Report condition assessments of all Epping Forest units that were updated in 2010 and 2014.
2. The 2023 *State of Nature Report* reports that nature is declining across the UK, and that the UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. The data shows that since 1970, the all-species indicator has shown an overall decline to around 69% of its starting value, and nearly 1 in 6 species are now threatened with extinction. The Government's legally binding environmental targets, set out in regulations made under the Environment Act 2021, include halting the decline in species abundance by 2030 and increasing species abundance by 2042.
3. To support the achievement of these targets, in 2023 Government set a long-term commitment to have 75% of SSSIs in favourable condition by 2042 under the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) (published in 2023 in accordance with the Environment Act 2021, as the first revision to the 25 Year Environment Plan

published in 2018). Two interim targets were also set for SSSIs to be achieved by the end of January 2028, these were:

- To have an up-to-date condition assessment for every SSSI in order to inform and support land managers about the state of their SSSIs and what actions are necessary to recover or maintain it in favourable condition.
 - To have actions on-track to achieve favourable condition on 50% of SSSI features by 2028.
4. Each feature is given one of six ratings: Favourable, Unfavourable recovering, Unfavourable no change, Unfavourable declining, Partly destroyed, or Destroyed. For further information on SSSI condition definitions and the key threats and pressures on Epping Forest SSSI, see Appendix 2.
 5. Management of the SSSI in Epping Forest has been a central tenet of Forest management. Since 2008, a large part of the delivery of the programmes has been funded directly through the Environmental Stewardship Schemes, this now falls under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) running from 2020-2033. The use of volunteers, such as the Epping Forest Conservation Volunteers and Epping Forest Heritage Trust volunteers has also been invaluable for managing areas of the SSSI that fall outside of the environmental stewardship schemes.

Current Position

6. In 2023 Natural England changed their approach to SSSI monitoring. Instead of subdividing SSSIs into units and making assessments of condition at the unit scale, they now assess the condition of special features across the whole of a SSSI. This approach, known as Whole Feature Assessment, helps to better understand what is affecting features and how SSSIs function as part of their wider landscape.
7. There are 26 active SSSI features for Epping Forest, the condition status for Epping Forest as of April 2025 is:
 - Favourable – 12 features (46.15%).
 - Unfavourable Recovering – 2 features (7.69%).
 - Unfavourable No Change – 2 features (7.69%).
 - Not Recorded – 10 (38.46%).
8. Natural England started the update surveys in 2024, assessing three SSSI features, and condition status updated, these included:
 - Lowland dry heath reported as unfavourable recovering.
 - Lowland wet heath reported as unfavourable recovering.
 - Population of *Zygodon forsterii* reported as favourable (a change from unfavourable recovering).
9. The reported updates on the condition of features can be viewed on Natural England's Designated Sites View webpage for Epping Forest SSSI: [Natural England Designated Sites View Epping Forest SSSI Condition of Features](#) and a breakdown of the updates are provided in Appendix 3.
10. The proposed timeline for condition assessments surveys for the remaining SSSI features from 2024-2028 is outlined in Appendix 3. Site visits for 2025 as part of the lowland dry acid grasslands condition assessment surveys will cover 12 sites.

Many of the condition assessment surveys require specialist surveys to be commissioned by Natural England, this is dependent on their funding and resourcing and, therefore, subject to change. Epping Forest staff are reviewing opportunities to support Natural England in undertaking the amphibian surveys in 2026 and ensuring existing data is provided for all features where it exists.

Proposals

11. Natural England will continue to visit SSSI features to re-assess their condition status to meet the Government's Environmental Improvement Plan interim targets. Staff will support Natural England with the condition assessment surveys, where resource is available and provide existing data to inform the assessments.
12. Staff will work with Natural England officers to fully understand the issues at these sites and devise appropriate management to bring these areas into *Favourable* condition and or ensure they are maintained.
13. The work required will be presented to this Committee through the Annual Work Programme, which will be prepared for January 2026 Committee. However, work to improve the condition of the SSSI is currently underway as part of the CSS projects, which started in 2020.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

14. Strategic implications – This proposal aligns with the Corporate Plan 2024-2029 Outcomes:
 - Leading Sustainable Environment: We have a responsibility to ensure that we act as a leader on environmental sustainability and strive to enhance it in all aspects of how we work. Supporting Natural England on updating Epping Forest's SSSI condition assessments and ensuring actions are on-track to achieve favourable condition on 50% of SSSI features by 2028 supports the Corporate Plan on climate action, resilience, and air quality.
 - Flourishing Public Spaces: Natural England's objective is to achieve 'favourable condition' status for all SSSIs. When the designated feature is in favourable condition it is being adequately conserved.
 - Diverse Engaged Communities. CSS works provide engaging educational and volunteering opportunities.
15. Financial implications – Large-scale complex habitat management work requiring machinery under the CSS will be completed by contractors funded by the CSS grant. However, volunteers are also involved in delivery and undertake most of the ongoing work. From late 2025 onwards more is likely to be done by the in-house Epping Forest Arboriculture and Grassland teams. Survey work for amphibian assemblage will be supported by the Epping Forest Conservation team. The costs will be covered by the local risk budget of the Epping Forest Division.
16. Resource implications – The Epping Forest Conservation team as of March 2025 are fully resourced, although onboarding is still underway. Furthermore, the wider Conservation and Land Management teams will be fully resourced by Summer 2025, there is still a lead in time required to onboard all staff for demonstrable

change and implementation of work programmes. Condition assessment surveys for several SSSI features requires specialist expertise, which the in-house teams do not have the skill set and or the capacity to complete.

17. Legal implications - The habitat work involved in managing the SSSI will be carried out in line with the Conservators' powers and duties under the Epping Forest Act 1878. SSSIs are regulated by provisions in the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended), which require the owner of land included in a SSSI to obtain Natural England's written consent before carrying out certain operations (s.28E). All relevant work carried out to date has been given consent (via the CSS Agreement process), and any further necessary consent will be obtained from Natural England before works commence.
18. Risk implications – The environmental targets set out in regulations made under the Environment Act 2021 are legally binding on central Government. However, there is a risk to the organisation's reputation as charity trustee and manager of green spaces from 2028 if there are still features that have not had an updated condition assessment survey completed with associated actions on-track to achieve favourable condition on 50% of the SSSI features.
19. Equalities implications – None
20. Climate implications – It is important for SSSI features to be in favourable condition when considering climate implications, this is because their condition can play a role in mitigating and adapting to climate change. By keeping SSSI habitats in favourable condition, we can enhance their ability to support:
 - Biodiversity resilience.
 - Carbon sequestration.
 - Climate adaptations.
 - Ecosystem services.
21. Security implications – None
22. Charity Implications – Epping Forest is a registered charity (number 232990). Charity Law obliges Members to ensure that the decisions they take in relation to the Charity must be taken in the best interests of the Charity.

Conclusion

23. One of the goals under the Government's 2023 Environmental Improvement Plan is to have 75% of SSSIs in favourable condition by 2042. The Government's Environmental Improvement Plan set two interim targets for SSSIs to be achieved by the end of January 2028, these were:
 - To have an up-to-date condition assessment for every SSSI; and
 - To have actions on-track to achieve favourable condition on 50% of SSSI features by 2028.

The goals and interim targets for SSSIs set out in the 2023 EIP are intended to contribute to meeting the Government's legally binding targets (contained in regulations made under the Environment Act 2021) that relate to biodiversity and species abundance.

24. Natural England started the update surveys in 2024 and outlined a proposed timeline for condition assessments surveys for the features from 2024-2028. In 2024 three SSSI features were assessed with the condition status updated, these included:
- Lowland dry heath reported as unfavourable recovering. No change from previous assessment this is because restoration of this habitat can take many years.
 - Lowland wet heath reported as unfavourable recovering. No change from previous assessment this is because restoration of this habitat can take many years.
 - Population of *Zygodon forsterii* reported as favourable. An improvement from unfavourable recovering, this is because a detailed assessment accounting for the reports (2019, 2022 2024), site monitoring and management has confirmed the required attributes are above favourable threshold levels.
25. In 2025 two SSSI features will be assessed, these include lowland dry acid grassland types U1 and U4. Further SSSI feature assessment surveys will progress from 2025/2026 to 2028.
26. Staff continue to work closely with colleagues at Natural England to ensure appropriate management brings the remaining Epping Forest SSSI features into 'Favourable' condition. The ongoing CSS work that started in 2020 and will continue to 2033 is the key management tool to maintain and improve Epping Forest's SSSI condition status.

Appendices

Appendix 1: SSSI Condition Assessment Updates 2010 and 2014.

Appendix 2: SSSI Condition Definitions and Key Threats and Pressures on Epping Forest SSSI.

Appendix 3: SSSI Condition Assessment Updates 2024 Onwards.

Background Papers

The condition of Epping Forest Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) – SE5 41/15. DEFRA (2023) *Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 – First Revision of the 25 Year Environment Plan*.

Natural England: [Designated Sites View SSSI Feature Condition Summary](#)

State of Nature Partnership (2023) *State of Nature*.

DEFRA (2024) *Environmental Improvement Plan annual progress report, April 2023 to March 2024*.

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