

## City of London Corporation Committee Report

<b>Committee(s):</b> Epping Forest and Commons Committee – For information	<b>Dated:</b> 29/05/2025
<b>Subject:</b> The Commons – Assistant Directors Quarterly Update January to March 2025	<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 January 2025 – March 2025. Finance and risk reporting is being undertaken through separate reports.

Of note, through 137 activity sessions 979 volunteers contributed 4525.75 hours of support, slightly above average for the period. The 17-year-old Information point at Burnham Beeches was renewed at a cost of £50,000 using income from filming. First phase works have been completed on both the signage and fencing capital works programmes. Final payment settlements have been received from the Rural Payments Agency which has seen the original Countryside Stewardship Scheme funding levels at Burnham Beeches restored and additional funding at Ashted Common received of £411,256 to be used for veteran tree management. Over the period we had two reported accidents and one near miss and a potentially significant fire at the West Wickham and Coulsdon Common’s office was successfully tackled by a member of staff. Consultative Group meetings were held for each of the four charities during the period.

### Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- Note the report.

## **Main Report**

### **Current Position**

1. This quarterly report documents the outcomes of work to deliver the objectives of the Natural Environment Strategies and Business Plan. A breakdown of activity by objective is given in Appendix 1 with summary details and key points highlighted in this report.

Progress against Natural Environment Strategies and Business Plan objectives for the period January - March 2025.

### **Nature Conservation and Resilience**

2. Practical habitat management activity included:
  - a. At Ashted Common
    - i. Tree safety, tree root zone protection, scrub management and CSS works completed as planned.
    - ii. New entrance/byelaw boards installed.
    - iii. Consultants have submitted final proposals for a possible new wetland area on the Common.
    - iv. Liaised with researchers into veteranized trees from Cardiff University and Sweden.
  - b. At the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons:
    - i. Tree safety and CSS works completed as planned.
    - ii. Livestock fences replaced along Hayes Lane as part of the two-year City of London Corporation (CoLC) capital funded project.
    - iii. Hazel planting on West Wickham Common – with support from the Rotary Club.
    - iv. Bird and moth surveys completed on the Coulsdon Commons and a surveyor appointed to undertake NVC surveys on Farthing Downs and Riddlesdown Common.
  - c. At Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common
    - i. American grey squirrel management started.
    - ii. Tree safety and CSS work by staff and contractors completed as planned.
    - iii. Grazing Stoke Common with Exmoor ponies.
    - iv. Propping of ancient trees to extend their life for as long as possible, through reducing the risk of them collapsing. We are grateful for the support from arborists from Hampstead Heath.
3. **C**onservation activity highlights of the period are:
  - a. Skylark nesting protection zones established at Ashted Common, Farthing Downs and Riddlesdown Common. The work at the Coulsdon Commons was supported by the Downlands Trust via a grant from the CoLC. This is the first year this work has been done at Ashted and is part of an expanding programme across the Natural Environment Division sites to protect this much-loved species on our sites.

- b. At Burnham Beeches the recutting of over 300 young pollards was completed. This is a less well known side of the work at Burnham Beeches but is vital for sustaining the pollard landscape and creating the microhabitats required by some of the specialist species found at the site.
  - c. Annual works to promote conservation of the Brown Hairstreak butterfly (*Thecla betulae*) were completed at Spring Park which is a stronghold for this species. The female brown hairstreaks lay conspicuous, round, white eggs on the dark bark of young blackthorn twigs and a local volunteer undertakes annual counts of these as part of the conservation programme.
- 4. Work is progressing on the hosting of the Biodiversity of Pollard and Veteran Tree conference on the 25 and 26<sup>th</sup> June based at Burnham Beeches. The first day of the conference will be at Taplow Court centre, courtesy of SGI (UK), and will be followed by evening walk of the gardens and informal conference supper. Day two will be at Burnham Beeches and will have a focus on the work of the COL on ancient tree management.

## Community Engagement

- 5. Over the quarter 19 local community groups and institutions were worked with involving over 1188 people. Groups included schools and youth groups such as Cubs and brownies, running and local history clubs. At Ashted Common a new Duke of Edinburgh (DoE) volunteer work party operates on a monthly basis and the annual Meet the Calves event at the Coulsdon Commons was a big success with 650 people attending.
- 6. The annual review of the progress of Burnham Beeches Strategic Access Monitoring and Management Project was undertaken with colleagues from Buckinghamshire Council. So far this project has raised £1.2 million since it started with a further £450,000 raised in 2024-25. The annual report on the project was in preparation at the time of writing and will be brought to the next EF&CC meeting.
- 7. Across the estate the following visits were hosted to share experience:
  - a. At Ashted Common:
    - i. A ranger gave a presentation to 32 people from the Woodland Trust and a tour for students from Sparsholt College was held.
    - ii. Talks to the Probus Club, Elmbridge Natural History Society, and Elmbridge NHS.
  - b. At Burnham Beeches
    - i. Talks and visits to Burnham Parkinsons Group and Welling Hatfield Borough Council Tree Wardens.
  - c. At the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons:
    - i. Students from UCL were given a guided walk of Riddlesdown Quarry as part of their course work.
    - ii. Talk given to the Natural History Museum London by the Conservation Ecologist.

8. Consultative group meetings were held during the period for the four charities. The BBSC and AC meetings followed a hybrid format and the WWCC was an online meeting. Notes from the Consultative Group meetings can be found in the EF&CC share point folder for the Commons. There was all round good support for the work of the charities with some discussion on local planning issues and on the impact of the charity review and income generation at West Wickham Common. See also para 9.
9. The Chairman and Deputy Chairman along with site management staff met with the London Assembly member for Bexley and Bromley, Thomas Turrell, and London Borough of Bromley member for Mottingham Ward, Will Rowlands, at Spring Park. Both are local members representing the Spring Park and West Wickham Common area and we had a very helpful discussion covering a range of site and community matters.

### **Access and Recreation**

10. Entrance signage project: The new entrance signage boards have all been installed at Ashted Common. These were made from Ashted oak and funded from the CoLC Capital Projects Fund. Procurement for 40 new large entrance boards has been completed at West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons with work being given to Landmark and again funded under CoLC Capital Projects Fund. The first entrance boards should be installed from September 2025.
11. Footprint Ecology have completed their report 'A framework for the Sustainable Visitor Use of Burnham Beeches'. The overarching aim for the framework is to protect the special nature of Burnham Beeches while enabling access. Secondary aims recognise the importance of welcoming a diverse range of visitors and looking long term, reflecting the 500 year vision for the site. Preparation of the framework was a requirement of the Sustainable Access Monitoring and Management (SAMM) project at Burnham Beeches with a report being prepared for a future EF&CC.
12. Using funding from recent filming income the Burnham Beeches Information Point was completely revamped. The original information point was installed in 2007 and the £50,000 refresh has been pending for a while until the funding was available. The new accessible and interactive displays make use of some stunning pictures from local naturalists and have the facility for seasonal variation in the display.
13. Heads of Terms and contract have been agreed with Paw Wash to install and run a pay for dog washing facility at Farthing Downs Car Park. A café tender was prepared for Farthing Downs and Kenley, however, before promoting we have been approached by suppliers, and we are investigating these options with the help of City Surveyor colleagues.

### **Learning and Heritage**

14. 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.
15. Over the quarter, 137 activity sessions were delivered with 979 volunteers contributing 4525.75 hours of support, slightly above average for the period. In addition to practical conservation tasks activity included:
- a. At Ashted Common:
    - i. Preparation and running of six mega task events.
    - ii. Firebreak maintenance works.
    - iii. General estate maintenance works.
    - iv. Tool maintenance.
  - b. At the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons:
    - i. Livestock management.
    - ii. Litter picking.
  - c. At Burnham Beeches
    - i. Livestock management.
    - ii. Reptile and amphibian monitoring.
    - iii. Admin support.
    - iv. Ecological monitoring.
16. At West Wickham and Coulsdon Common one apprentice is working towards a Level 2 Award in Countryside Management and one apprentice has just qualified and is currently working as maternity cover for six months at WWCC. At Burnham Beeches one apprentice is working towards a Level 2 Award in Countryside Management.
17. The Rangers at Ashted Common have been considering how they might encourage younger people to embrace the natural world on their doorstep - and hopefully inspire them to get involved in conservation work. One clear route to connect with the next generation is through the well-established Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. Younger participants in the scheme have already been helping the Rangers on Ashted Common for a number of years by litter-picking around the site while working towards their Bronze-level Award. However, the Rangers wanted to reach out to older young adults who need to complete the more substantial 'service' section of the Silver and Gold Awards, which requires a set number of weeks' commitment. A monthly programme has been started over the period with attendees completing a range of conservation tasks including, installing waymarkers and processing hazel coppice.

## **Income Generation**

18. Overall, car parking income for the year was £180,520 which is down nearly 10% on the four-year average. A very wet and unpleasant Q4 accounted for 5% of the reduced income alone. The impact of bad weather on visitor attendance is evident from the figures<sup>1</sup> from the rest of the year with the generally wet Q1 accounting for 3% of the 10%.

19. We have now received the full payment from the Rural Payments Agency following the resolution of our claim concerning the Countryside Stewardship scheme grant at Burnham Beeches for veteran trees works. The RPA accepted our claim and agreed to giving us three years notice of changing the grant conditions, resulting in us achieving £200,403 in income that had originally been taken away. With changes in grant payment rates this means that going forward our financial position concerning veteran tree works at Burnham Beeches has been restored to the originally planned funded level.
20. In accepting the case made by Burnham Beeches on the CSS veteran tree grant this led to the RPA identifying that they had underpaid both Epping Forest and Ashted Common on their respective CSS grant schemes. In the case of Ashted Common this has resulted in an additional payment of £411,256 for ancient tree works which has been set aside to help fund future veteran tree works at the site.

## **People Management**

21. Sixteen colleagues from across the Natural Environment Division attended a VETcert accredited training course at Ashted Common, Valuing and Managing Veteran Trees. VETcert is a pan-European certification scheme for veteran tree specialists, developed to raise the standard in veteran tree management. The training was run by Dr Helen Read, Conservation Officer at Burnham Beeches.
22. We were very pleased that the Ranger for Kenley Common won the CoLC's colleague of the year award. After 43 years working at Burnham Beeches one of our Ranger team retired and is very much missed. His role and a new Apprentice Ranger role at Burnham Beeches are currently being advertised.
23. Over the quarter we have had two health and safety incidents, and one reported near miss. The H&S incidents included a tick bite at Ashted Common which is a high-risk area for the tick borne Lyme disease. The two H&S incidents in a quarter are very slightly below average.
24. At the end of 2024 we suffered a fire at the WWCC office in an office next to the hay store and barn with livestock. Due to timely action by the Support Services Officer who tackled the fire (and was complemented on by the fire service team) and other staff who contacted the fire service a potentially very unpleasant outcome was averted. At the time of writing the outcome of investigations is still pending.

## **Conclusion**

25. Management plan implementation has progressed as planned. Over the period we had two reported accidents and one near miss. There was fire at the WWCC office which a member of staff successfully put out. Community support through

volunteering remains high and above average for the period. We currently have two vacancies looking to be filled.

## **Appendices**

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

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