

<b>Committee(s)</b>	<b>Dated:</b>
Epping Forest and Commons	7 September 2015
<b>Subject:</b> The condition of Epping Forest Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)	<b>Public</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Superintendent of Epping Forest SEF 41/15	<b>For Information</b>

### Summary

This report updates your Committee on recent assessments of five units within Epping Forest Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and reviews progress towards the Government's Biodiversity 2020 Strategy target of securing 95% of all SSSIs in 'Favourable' or 'Unfavourable recovering' condition by the year 2020.

The UK government published the Biodiversity 2020 Strategy in 2011 to outline how it was going to meet the targets set out in the EU Biodiversity Strategy agreed a year earlier. 83.5% of the Epping Forest SSSI, which covers 69.5% of Epping Forest land, currently meets the Government target. Natural England, the government's adviser for the natural environment in England, is responsible for carrying out these assessments of habitat condition.

Management of the SSSI in Epping Forest has been a central tenet of Forest management since the publication of 'Epping Forest: A Management Strategy' by the City of London in 1990 which followed the formal re-notification of the Forest's special interest in March 1990. This provided the framework for all subsequent annual work programmes until the Forest Management Plans of 1998 and 2004, which both developed SSSI management targets further. Since 2008, a large part of the delivery of the programmes has been funded directly through the Environmental Stewardship Scheme and the also supported Single (now Basic) Payment Scheme.

Staff continue to work closely with colleagues at Natural England to ensure appropriate management brings the remaining 16.5% of the Epping Forest SSSI into 'Favourable' or 'Unfavourable recovering' condition.

### Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- Note the changes to *Favourable* and *Unfavourable Recovering* status following a review of five areas within the Epping Forest SSSI in 2014 and that there are no longer any SSSI units in *Unfavourable Declining* condition.

## Main Report

### Background

1. With increasing populations, pollution, climate change and invasive non-native species global biodiversity is under enormous pressure. Many species and habitats are being adversely affected with a recent analysis showing over 40% of the UK's priority habitats and 30% of priority species in decline, and 8 species lost entirely between 2002 and 2008.
2. In 2010 an ambitious conservation plan was agreed to protect global biodiversity at the UN Biodiversity Summit. One of the targets was to '*take effective and urgent action to halt the loss of biodiversity in order to ensure that by 2020 ecosystems are resilient and continue to provide essential services, thereby securing the planet's variety of life and contributing to human wellbeing...*'. The European Commission adopted a new EU Biodiversity Strategy to help to meet this and the other goals.
3. In response the UK Government published the Natural Environment White Paper as part of its commitment to meeting these targets. The Biodiversity 2020 Strategy published on 19 August 2011 builds on this White Paper and describes how these targets will be met in England. The 2020 Strategy has four broad outcomes: Habitats and ecosystems on land (including freshwater); Marine habitats, ecosystems and fisheries; Species; and People. Within the Habitats and ecosystems on land category are a number of targets, one of which relates to Sites of Special Scientific Interests (SSSI).
4. Of the total area of Epping Forest 1,728 hectares (69.5%) is designated as a SSSI. The SSSI citation states 'Epping Forest is one of only a few remaining large-scale examples of ancient wood-pasture in lowland Britain and has retained habitats of high nature conservation value including ancient semi-natural woodland, old grassland plains and scattered wetland.' All three of the main lowland wood-pasture types in Britain are found in Epping Forest with a large number of ancient pollards. Other important features are the 'nationally outstanding assemblage of invertebrates, a major amphibian interest and an exceptional breeding bird community'. The Forest's intricate mosaic of habitats is key to the biodiversity found in the Forest.
5. Since the formal re-notification of the Forest's special interest on 5<sup>th</sup> March 1990 under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) the SSSI condition has been a central tenet Forest management. At the time of notification the City of London published 'Epping Forest: A Management Strategy', a document produced for the Conservators by the Nature Conservancy Council (the successor body of which in England is Natural England). This document was also produced in collaboration of the Epping Forest Conservation Centre which provided the Conservators with ecological advice at the time. The appointment in 1989 of a new Superintendent's Deputy, with the new expanded title Superintendent's Deputy & Conservation Officer, was also made with the management of the SSSI in mind.

6. This Strategy was succeeded by two detailed Forest management plans (in 1998 and 2004) which developed the targets for the SSSI habitats and specific Forest compartments in more detail. All three documents have, for the last 25 years, provided the main framework for the Forest's annual work programmes. Since 2008 the work programmes have been supported by direct grant-funding from Natural England through of the Environmental Stewardship agreement with additional funding from the Single (now Basic) Payment Scheme.
7. In order to gauge the condition of the SSSI, Natural England (NE), the government's adviser for the natural environment in England, undertakes assessment of the habitats. Large-scale SSSIs are broken down into SSSI 'units'. The Epping Forest SSSI comprises 41 units, three of which are not owned by the City of London but are included in the SSSI as they are contiguous with Forest land.
8. Within each SSSI unit are a number of 'features' that contribute to the SSSI designation. They can be habitats, species or landscape features examples of these being acid grassland, the assemblage of amphibians and the landscape-scale mosaic of semi-natural habitats.
9. A proportion of the units are assessed every year, with all units being assessed on a 6-year rolling programme. Each unit is given one of six ratings: Favourable, Unfavourable recovering, Unfavourable no change, Unfavourable declining, Partly destroyed, Destroyed.
10. In the Biodiversity 2020 Strategy, one of the key targets for Habitats and Ecosystems on Land is that '95% of SSSIs are in favourable or recovering condition' by 2020.
11. A SSSI unit is assessed as being in:
  - Favourable condition - when all of its notified features are individually considered to be in favourable condition;
  - Unfavourable recovering - when one or more of the notified features is not favourable condition but there are management mechanisms in place to restore them to favourable condition;
  - Unfavourable no change - when one or more of the notified features is not in favourable condition, they will not return to favourable condition unless there is a change to the management of the site or external pressures;
  - Unfavourable declining – when one or more of the notified features is not in favourable condition and are becoming progressively worse over time.
12. With the last two categories, the longer a SSSI unit remains in this condition the more difficult it will be to restore it to favourable condition.
13. It is not only the management of the site that affects a unit's condition. Climate change, air pollution, catastrophic events, pests and diseases will also have a bearing on the condition.
14. One of the main threats to Epping Forest's habitats is nitrogen air pollution. This was a key reason that the Conservators sponsored a PhD research project

between 2003 – 2006 into its impacts on the Forest vegetation. In the last assessments by NE of SSSI units air pollution was taken as one of the contributing factor for all units. Natural England is currently reviewing how to reflect air quality in the condition assessments for SSSIs in the future.

## Current Position

15. The condition assessments of all Epping Forest units were last updated in 2010. However, five SSSI units were re-assessed in 2014 and the resulting updated figures are presented alongside the 2010 numbers in the table below and explained in the subsequent paragraphs 16 and 17. This table below presents the figures and percentages for City of London-owned SSSI land only (note: the government website figures will include the additional SSSI land as well)

<b>Condition assessment</b>	<b>Percentage of SSSI by area (%) 2010 assessment/2014 update</b>	<b>Hectares 2010 assessment/2014 update</b>	<b>Number of SSSI units 2010 assessment/2014 update</b>
Favourable	33.4/ <b>29.3</b>	598.5/ <b>524.7</b>	10/ <b>9</b>
Unfavourable recovering	48.2/ <b>54.2</b>	863.7/ <b>970.3</b>	20/ <b>22</b>
Unfavourable no change	14.3/ <b>14.3</b>	255.8/ <b>255.8</b>	7/ <b>7</b>
Unfavourable declining	1.8/ <b>0</b>	32.8/ <b>0</b>	1/ <b>0</b>

16. Contributing factors for the ‘Unfavourable no change’ rating of seven units in this category cover reasons of scrub encroachment, insufficient grassland management, poor condition of water bodies, and high levels of recreational pressure. The one unit in ‘Unfavourable declining’ is Unit 133 Highams Park & The Sale. This is primarily for reasons of air pollution, but also poor condition of water bodies. Across all units, the most common issues, after air pollution, are the need for greater management of grasslands either through grazing or cutting (19 units), and the poor condition of water bodies (15 units).

17. Five units were surveyed last year and their condition assessments are due to be updated to the Natural England website imminently (as reflected in the table above). One unit 106 – St Thomas’s Quarters has been changed from *Favourable* to *Unfavourable Recovering* in the table. This change to the statistics does not really mark a material change at the site. Rather it reflects the wording of the original assessment (as well as the 2014 survey) more accurately as it takes into account the continuing problems of air pollution and Beech tree health, which seem to have been overlooked in compiling the website statistics in 2010. Three units 110 - Wake Valley and Rushey Plain; 207 - Long Running and 211 - Deer Shelter Plain remain as *Unfavourable Recovering*. Unit 133 Highams Park will change positively from *Unfavourable Declining* to *Unfavourable Recovering* due to the works associated with the Highams Park dam strengthening project and the Keystone Tree work there.

18. Management of the SSSI has been included in the annual work programmes since 1990, and recently a large part of this delivery is funded through the Entry and Higher Level Stewardship (ELS and HLS) payments and the Single (now Basic) Payment Scheme. With the end of ELS and HLS in late 2018, the new Countryside Stewardship Scheme would provide the source of funding to continue this work and discussions with NE will be undertaken in advance of 2018..
19. A small proportion of the SSSI work required falls outside of the annual ELS and HLS operations. This is often at sites that are difficult to access with machinery. The use of volunteers, such as the Epping Forest Conservation Volunteers, has been invaluable for managing these sites.

## Proposals

20. The priority will be to target work at units that are assessed as *Unfavourable Declining* and *Unfavourable No Change* to achieve the improved *Unfavourable Recovering* status and help to meet the Biodiversity 2020 Strategy target of “95% of SSSIs .... in favourable or recovering condition”.
21. 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* or *Unfavourable Recovering* condition. There will also be additional work in the units classified as *Favourable* or *Unfavourable Recovering* to ensure they are maintained or continue to improve.
22. The work required will be presented to this Committee through the Annual Work Programme.
23. Natural England will continue to visit additional SSSI units to re-assess their condition status following management undertaken. A further two units will be assessed during 2015.

## Corporate & Strategic Implications

24. **City Together Strategy** – The work proposals above meet two themes “the Heart of a World Class City which supports our communities” and “the Heart of a World Class City which protects, promotes and enhances our environment.”
25. **Open Spaces Business Plan 2015-16** – The work proposed meets the vision for this plan ‘To preserve and protect our world class green spaces for the benefit of our local community and the environment.’ Furthermore, it meets two of the Departmental Objectives ‘Protect and conserve ecology, biodiversity and heritage of our sites.’ And ‘Enrich the lives of Londoners by providing a high quality and engaging educational and volunteering opportunities.’
26. **Epping Forest Management Plan** - The proposals match a number of the Visions for Epping Forest in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including:

- Epping Forest's position as a unique and ancient landscape for people and wildlife will be strengthened;
- The Forest will retain its natural aspect with the diversity of wildlife habitats enhanced and the features of international importance protected.
- Epping Forest will be highly valued as part of a larger and fully accessible protected landscape area.

## Implications

27. **Financial** – The majority of this work will be done by the in-house Epping Forest teams and by volunteers. Contractors and consultants may be used to achieve some of this work. The costs will be covered by the local risk budget of the Epping Forest Division. Income from the Basic Payment Scheme and Environmental Stewardship Scheme supplement this budget. In 2018 the current Environmental Stewardship agreement for Epping Forest finishes, work will begin in 2016 to prepare an application for the Countryside Stewardship Scheme which is now replacing Environmental Stewardship.
28. The type of work that consultants will be asked to undertake will be the preparation of management plans and species surveys. Contractors would be undertaking tree thinning and scrub clearance that is identified as necessary in these plans.
29. **Legal** – The habitat work involved in managing the SSSI will be carried out as part of the Conservators' powers and duties under the Epping Forest Act 1878. All work will be approved beforehand by Natural England to comply with the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 as amended by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.
30. **Key Risk** – There is a risk to the organisation's reputation for green space management after 2020 if there are still units in *Unfavourable No Change* or any that return to *Unfavourable Declining* when Natural England and DEFRA review the progress that was made on the Biodiversity 2020 Strategy.

## Conclusion

31. Reflecting International and European Union-wide concern regarding the myriad threats to global biodiversity the UK government has committed to halting the decline of species and habitat quality through the Biodiversity 2020 Strategy. One of the aims is to ensure that SSSIs are in favourable or recovering condition.
32. Since 1990 annual work programmes have contributed very significantly to the management of the SSSI habitats and ensured their favourable and recovering conditions have been retained or reached over a quarter of a century despite the difficulties of reinstating grazing, managing the largest ancient tree population in the UK and dealing with the many adverse impacts of pollution and non-native species. As a result of recent efforts no Forest SSSI units are now considered to be *Unfavourable Declining*.

33. Eight units within Epping Forest SSSI currently fall below the desired habitat condition threshold. For these the priority remains to work closely with Natural England to continue the efforts to return these areas back to a recovering condition and thereby to also contribute to the national effort to meet the important 2020 targets set by government.

### **Appendices**

None.

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