

<b>Committee(s)</b>	<b>Dated:</b>
Epping Forest & Commons Committee	04-07-2016
<b>Subject:</b> Improvement Programme for England's <i>Natura 2000</i> Sites (IPENS) - Epping Forest SAC Site Improvement Plan	<b>Public</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Director of Open Spaces	<b>For Information</b>
<b>Report author:</b> Superintendent of Epping Forest	

### Summary

Epping Forest's beech forest and heathlands are recognised for their importance internationally; the beech forest with its ancient trees having a scientifically-recognised 'global status'. Recognition takes the form of protective designation as Epping Forest Special Area of Conservation (SAC) within the EU *Natura 2000* network, under the legal framework of the Bern Convention 1979.

This report presents the background and rationale for a Site Improvement Plan (SIP) for the SAC, which considers the priorities for action to achieve improved condition of these habitats and their associated species. The SIP has been produced by Natural England following discussions with the Environment Agency and your officers. The SIP is not a legal document but instead is the basis for planning, agreeing and coordinating contributions by various bodies towards the goal of a better protected Forest. The priorities of the SIP can be considered and enacted through a variety of routes, including the Epping Forest Management Plan and the local plan process. Funding for some of the actions may require new resources whilst others may use the existing grant structures such as Countryside Stewardship.

### Recommendation

Members are asked to:

- Note the report.

### Main Report

#### Background

1. Epping Forest was first proposed as a candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC) in 1995 under the EU Habitats Directive (reported to Committee on 21<sup>st</sup> April 1995 (SEF68/95)). The designation as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) was confirmed by the UK government on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2005 and reported to your Committee later that year (Committee report SEF 21/05).
2. As an SAC Epping Forest is part of a large network of European Union (EU) sites entitled the *Natura 2000* network which also includes sites protected by the EU Birds Directive. The *Natura 2000* network is, in turn, part of the wider European (and north African) *Emerald Network* of protected habitats and also directly

addresses the world-wide target in the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 (Aichi Target 11).

3. These networks of sites stem from the legal framework provided under the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (BC 1979), to which both the UK and the EU (including the UK as a Member State) are signatories. The international protection afforded Epping Forest by this designation, therefore, is provided by the UK Government in fulfilment of its commitments under both the BC1979 and the CBD using the legal mechanism of the EU Habitats Directive to enforce it.
4. The qualifying selection criteria for the designation are based on an internationally-agreed scientific classification of habitat types coupled with an assessment of the scarcity of those habitats, their vulnerability to threats and the conservation status of certain rare or threatened species dependent on them.
5. In bio-geographical terms (an ecological division of the world's ecosystems based on climatic area, altitude etc) Epping Forest lies within the Atlantic bio-geographical zone and its habitats are compared with those of other sites lying within this zone. The three qualifying habitats in Epping Forest SAC are Atlantic acidophilous beech forest, European dry heath and Northern Atlantic wet heaths with *Erica tetralix*. In addition there is one qualifying species, which is the Stag Beetle *Lucanus cervus*.
6. The area of Forest covered by the SAC designation is 1,604.95 hectares (65% of the Forest area). The beech forest habitat is the primary habitat criterion for the designation and Epping Forest is amongst nearly 450 *Natura 2000*-protected sites across 9 European countries that encompass this habitat in various amounts. However, of these only 107 sites are given 'global status' by scientists for this habitat and, therefore, considered crucial for its worldwide protection.
7. Epping Forest is one of these 107 'global status' sites and the Forest represents the second largest extent of the habitat in the UK, covering a core area of over 640 hectares, behind only the New Forest. Epping Forest also contains more ancient beech trees than any other site in the country.

### **Current Position**

8. Although Epping Forest is legally protected within the *Natura 2000* network it still faces a number of key threats to its habitat condition, some new, others of long-standing and most becoming more significant with the increase in development around London and south Essex.
9. Foremost amongst these is air pollution, largely from atmospheric nitrogen (N). Recognising this, your Committee supported a PhD research project in 2003 in collaboration with Imperial College London, the Environment Agency ((EA) - a non-departmental public body responsible for the protection & enhancement of the environment) and English Nature, Natural England's (NE) predecessor (the Government's statutory advisor for the natural environment in England). The

results of this study have contributed to the emerging international scientific consensus about the impact of N on natural vegetation.

10. Other high-level issues that need to be managed and monitored include under-grazing of the heathland vegetation, particularly to help offset the pollution impacts; public access issues (e.g. soil compaction and dog fouling); natural regeneration of beech from seed and non-native invasive species.
11. To address these significant issues NE, together with the EA and supported by funding from the EU, has developed Site Improvement Plans (SIPs) for all *Natura 2000* sites in England.
12. The Epping Forest SIP (version 1) was produced following discussions with your officers in 2015. The SIP is not a legal document but instead provides the agencies' overview of the current and predicted issues and outlines the priority measures required to improve the condition of the sites. In addition, it outlines how those measures might be put into action, lists the information that may still be required to enact them and indicates whether there is an estimate of costs or not. The SIP is attached at **Appendix 1** of this report.

## Options

13. Some actions are already being taken towards the priority measures. For example, sustaining and monitoring levels of grazing are being put in place through the Grazing Strategy supported by Natural England grants (i.e. Countryside Stewardship).
14. Limiting the impacts of air pollution is a highly complex process and this difficult issue has to be addressed at a national level as well as through local initiatives. Under the SIP, Natural England is proposing a Site Nitrogen Action Plan (SNAP) for Epping Forest as a priority and under the new Epping Forest Management Plan consideration needs to be given to renewing and updating the Forest Transport Strategy.
15. Tackling Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) also requires consideration of priorities, costs and the engagement of others. A Strategy will be written to form part of the new Epping Forest Management Plan and this would be one of the Conservators' contributions towards the SIP.
16. The SIP provides a focus for engaging other stakeholders too, including local authorities like Epping Forest District Council (EFDC) and Essex County Council (ECC), and provides a framework for seeking funding.

## Proposals

17. It is recommended that any actions described in the SIP, which the Conservators may wish to or be able to undertake are examined, costed and then subsequently pursued through the framework of the new Epping Forest Management Plan and by cooperation through other forums, including the Duty-to-Cooperate meetings of the Forest's various local authorities.

## **Corporate & Strategic Implications**

18. The SIP fits with the Corporate Strategic Aim of providing valued services to the nation and the Open Spaces Departmental Objective to: "Protect and conserve the ecology, biodiversity and heritage of our sites".

## **Implications**

19. The SIP is not a legal document and its proposals do not compel action. Instead the document provides a framework to help focus the different agencies and authorities, including the Conservators, on cooperative actions to improve the condition of the Forest.

20. The SIP identifies where more information or funding may be needed (e.g. air pollution) or where current actions may need to be supported further into the future (e.g. grazing). For other actions (e.g. a recreational management plan) discussions and agreements will need to be made through both the Epping Forest Management Plan, local authority local plans and other forums, taking into account changing recreational interests and the likely impacts of increases in local housing allocations near the Forest.

## **Conclusion**

21. Epping Forest SAC is part of an internationally-protected network of natural habitats for its beech forest, heathland habitat and Stag beetle population. Its favourable condition is under continued threat from a variety of factors, especially air pollution, recreational pressures and the introduction of non-native species. In recognition of a need for coordinated action to improve the condition of such an important site Natural England, working with the Environment Agency, has compiled a Site Improvement Plan (SIP). The priorities of the SIP provide a framework to work with others in seeking the resources and the commitments to protecting the Forest. The forthcoming Epping Forest Management Plan and the wider local plan process are highlighted as the mechanisms through which support and resources can be garnered and focused to achieve these actions.

## **Appendices**

- Appendix 1 – Site Improvement Plan (SIP) for Epping Forest (Natural England 2015)

## **Background Papers**

- SEF 68/95: *Epping Forest – possible Special Area of Conservation*. Report to Epping Forest & Open Spaces Committee 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1995.
- SEF 21/05: *Epping Forest Special Area of Conservation (SAC) designation*. Report to Epping Forest & Open Spaces Committee 12<sup>th</sup> September 2005.

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