

Committee(s):	Date(s):
Ashtead Common Consultative Group	19.01.2018
Subject: Management Planning	Public
Report of: Superintendent of The Commons	For Information
<p>Summary</p> <p>The current management plan for Ashtead Common expires in just over three years' time. Ahead of this a new plan must be developed, consulted upon and adopted.</p> <p>This report describes the early stages of a programme of work designed to underpin the new plan and inform its future development.</p> <p>Recommendation(s)</p> <p>Members are asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note the report 	

Main Report

Background

1. The current management plan for Ashtead Common covers the period from April 2011 to March 2021. Before commencing the process of developing a new plan, the Ashtead team are working together to progress operational plans for key aspects of management activity, namely the management of:
 - a. veteran oak pollards
 - b. fire breaks and rides
 - c. bracken
 - d. scrub grassland
 - e. grazing
2. Some of the developments proposed in these plans will need to be consulted upon, but in the main the intention is to implement the plans as soon as they are developed, so that the new management plan is informed by working examples of sustainable management practice.
3. For the past year the team at Ashtead, assisted by Dr Helen Read, have been exploring opportunities to develop future management approaches to the work on Ashtead Common, structured around two visions, one concise and one narrative. The narrative vision is appended to this report (Appendix 1). Here is the concise vision:

Ashtead Common: a place for countryside recreation and wildlife conservation where community involvement remains integral to maintaining an open space of national significance. A place that resists urban pressures to protect an historic landscape and its features, in a setting proactively managed to retain and enhance biodiversity.

4. The City Corporation has now owned and managed Ashtead Common for 25 years. During this time there has been a great deal of effort invested to protect the site, provide access, protect features, enhance biodiversity and restore the historic wood pasture landscape.
5. This period can be characterised as a restoration phase, and consequently much of the effort expended has been packaged as project work targeted at reversing a potential decline in biodiversity.
6. Given the timescales we are working to, it would not be unreasonable to surmise that the next 25 years will also be characterised as a restoration phase. However, alongside the targeted project work, it is now time to raise the profile of crucial ongoing day-to-day, year-on-year management activity. This will ensure that the work of the last 25 years is consolidated and will maintain a sustainable consistency of management activity to ensure gains achieved through project work are not lost.

Current Position

7. Veteran oak pollards

Managing the veteran pollards and the decaying wood habitat that they provide is the main focus of conservation work on the Common. We are in year seven of a 15 year programme (to be repeated for an additional 15 years) to manage each individual living pollard. Recently the way this programme of work is delivered year-on-year was adjusted, so that now work is focussed on one area, or district, of the common each year. This has made the programme cheaper and therefore more sustainable to deliver in the long term. It is still very early days for this programme of work, and monitoring its effectiveness is vital to assess if further adjustments are required.

As well as preserving the existing pollards for as long as possible, the new 2021 management plan will need to concern itself with how to maintain a continuity of decaying wood habitat in the long term.

8. Firebreaks

Closely allied to managing each pollard individually is the creation and maintenance of an effective network of firebreaks to protect groups of veteran pollards from the potential of catastrophic loss from fire. The current review of firebreaks is presented in map form and appended to this report (Appendix 2). This map clearly demonstrates the way in which we intend to implement the new operational plans. The red lines show existing firebreaks which will be maintained as they are now to an existing specification. The green lines show existing paths and rides that can easily be added to the network to fill-in missing links. This work will be incorporated into the existing work programme so that these areas are managed in a new way ahead of 2021. The blue lines show where there is potential to create new firebreaks to further protect

clusters of veteran pollards. This aspect will be consulted upon as part of the new 2021 to 2031 management plan, with a view to implementing the proposal sometime during this period if agreed.

9. Bracken

Linked to managing firebreaks is the management of bracken, because bracken represents the most abundant fuel source for any potential fire. A bracken training day conducted as part of the management plan review process highlighted discrepancies between past and current bracken management regimes. The bracken management map appended to this report (Appendix 3) shows proposed changes that will be made to the on-going work programme to get the bracken management issue under more effective control. This enhanced control regime includes spraying bracken with herbicide, a technique that was used to some effect on the Common many years ago.

10. Scrub grassland

It is clear from experience gathered over the last 25 years that scrub grassland needs to be managed continually on a rotational basis through on-going year-on-year management to maintain heterogeneity and therefore biodiversity. Allowing scrub to grow in one amorphous mass of the same age is bad for biodiversity, but so is cutting it all down at the same time and failing to manage the regrowth. The scrub grassland map appended to this report (Appendix 4) is an extract from a whole site plan for the management, and crucially the ongoing maintenance, of scrub grassland. For the first time this plan includes the ecotones running parallel to rides and paths as part of the rotation. Some areas are to be permanently maintained as open grassland, but the majority of the sub one acre blocks are allowed to regrow before being cut again on a relatively short rotation of eight to 15 years. This is deemed to provide the best habitat for breeding birds.

11. Grazing

The first year of the grazing partnership with Surrey Wildlife Trust has gone very well and it is clear that this relationship will provide a sound basis for the future grazing of the Common. The invisible fence approach has been referred to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) for their consideration, delaying its implementation. However, the intention is to incrementally expand grazing to incorporate more areas, including wood pasture and rides using the most appropriate system available at the time. Currently the best system available is temporary electric fencing.

Options

12. There is the option to develop and change the operational plans and vision statements throughout the development process to reflect feedback from consultation

Proposals

13. It is proposed that the operational plans, together with a visual representation of the narrative vision, are worked up to their near final versions by mid 2018.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

14. The work described in this report supports the aims of the Open Spaces Department's Business Plan with particular reference to the key action to *'protect and conserve the ecology, biodiversity and heritage of our sites.'*

Implications

15. As the operational plans progress there is a possibility that the cumulative demands of the various elements generate an unsustainable work programme. Managing this risk is regarded as an integral part of the process, and plans will be amended to avoid this.

Conclusion

16. The development of operational plans to guide the restoration and routine maintenance of various habitats and site features will inform a bottom up approach to developing the next management plan for Ashtead Common.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – Vision for Ashtead Common (narrative version)
- Appendix 2 – Fire Breaks Map
- Appendix 3 – Bracken Management Map
- Appendix 4 – Scrub Grassland Map

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