



AN OVERVIEW OF BANSTEAD COMMONS CONSERVATORS

INTRODUCTION

Banstead Commons Conservators have been invited to provide a presentation to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee on Wednesday 9 November 2022 to address the following:

Review of the Work of the Banstead Common Conservators.

Focus of the review to be on the services required and delivered, and not costs arrangements.

The aim of the review is to see how improvements can be made to services.

As landowners of Banstead Commons, Reigate and Banstead Borough Council and the Conservators are intrinsically connected. Following Brexit, the Conservators have been losing funding because of the withdrawal of the Single Farm Payment. This year we have been in discussions with the Council Leader regarding future funding and management priorities.

This document will provide you with an overview of Banstead Commons Conservators, our statutory duties and management prescriptions for Banstead Commons.

THE CONSERVATORS

The Banstead Commons Conservators are a statutory body created in 1893 to regulate and manage the four sites that make up Banstead Common. At the request of the landowner, Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, Banstead Commons Conservators have agreed to carry out the appropriate maintenance and repair works on the Commons. The landowner contributes to the cost of this work.

There are eight Conservators who are appointed by Reigate and Banstead Borough Council (RBBC) and each has a three-year term of office. Two Conservators are appointed to represent the owners of the soil (principally RBBC) and these are usually serving Councillors. The remaining six appointments are made to represent members of the public. The applications are considered and appointments made by RBBC (as successors to the vestry of the parish of Banstead). Until this year, the existing Conservators played no part in the appointments. The posts are voluntary and unpaid.

THE COMMONS

The Commons form a strategically important part of the Green Belt, separating North Surrey from Greater London and make up approximately half of Reigate and Banstead Borough Council (RBBC) owned open space. They provide recreation for both the local population and visitors from further afield and are widely used for dog walking, horse riding and cycling.

They are an important part of the local landscape and are acknowledged as important wildlife habitats with nationally rare and unusual species of plants and animals. Banstead Downs and Park Downs are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Burgh Heath and Banstead Heath are Sites of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI).



Park Downs, at 74 acres as well as being the smallest of the commons, it is also the quietest forming a south facing chalk slope to the north of Banstead Woods and is part of Chipstead Downs SSSI.

Park Downs is located in the Banstead Village ward and is adjacent to the Chipstead, Kingswood and Woodmansterne ward.

Banstead Downs, at 350 acres is an important open space both for its strategic importance as a buffer between suburban Sutton and Banstead Village, as a recreational area for residents of not only Banstead but also Sutton, Cheam and Carshalton and finally as an important chalk downland habitat having been designated a SSSI in 1955.

Banstead Downs is situated in Banstead Village and Nork wards.

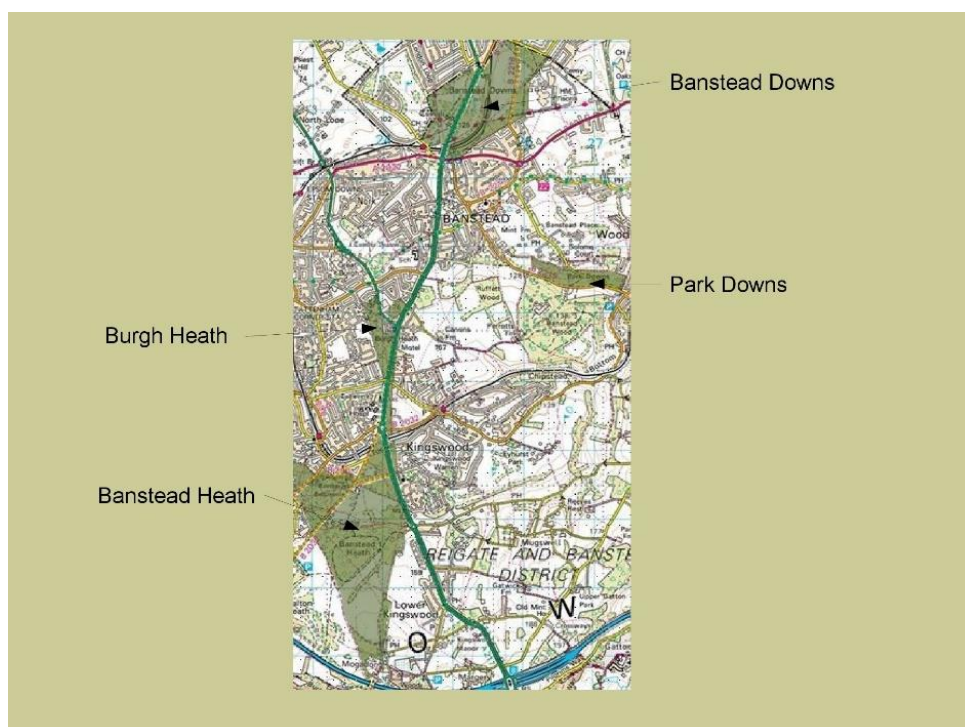
Burgh Heath situated adjacent to the A217, is surrounded by high density housing including the new Preston estate, hence it is an important green outlet for locals as well a busy thoroughfare. It is important for wildlife because of the four ponds.

The majority of Burgh Heath is situated in the Chipstead, Kingswood and Woodmansterne ward, with smaller sections within Tattenham Corner and Preston and Nork wards.

Banstead Heath, at 550 acres is the largest common, important as wildlife habitat (designated as a Site of Nature Conservation Importance SNCI) and is heavily used by walkers and horse riders and cyclists.

Banstead Heath is situated in the Lower Kingswood, Tadworth and Walton ward.

Overall, Banstead Commons consists of 1350 acres (550 hectares) of open space.





STAFF

Our full staff team complement should consist of three full-time Keeper and one part-time Clerk:

The Clerk (part-time), the BCC's Manager, is responsible to the Conservators and oversees all operations and administrative duties of the Conservators.

The Senior Ranger promotes and implements the work programmes and weekly schedules for the day to day work and supervises the Keepers, in accordance with compliance and management prescriptions.

The Keepers perform the day-to-day tasks under the supervision of the Senior Ranger.

Note. The Conservators are at present operating a reduced operational staff team of one following two recent retirements and the uncertainty of funding. We are aiming to recruit a second member of staff in the next few months and would like a full staff complement by the end of the financial year, subject to agreements in funding.

VOLUNTEERING AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The Commons are widely used by the public for a wide range of informal activities including walking, horse riding, cycling, bird watching and visits by various natural history groups. In addition, more formal events include cricket and golf and occasional activities such as orienteering and school visits.

The public are kept informed of the various aspects of the Commons via a series of notice boards distributed around the Commons, our social media pages and by a dedicated web page (www.bansteadcommonsconservators.co.uk). Whenever significant habitat management works take place on the Commons, such as conservation grazing and scrub clearance, notices are posted explaining the work so that visitors gain an understanding of our activities.

More specific interaction comes from dealings with local resident groups, local voluntary and wildlife groups, who are invited to Quarterly Meetings and are sent minutes of our meetings. For Banstead Heath, the largest and most widely used of the four areas of common, the BCC set up a Consultative Group, which has met regularly since 1998, to provide a two-way conduit for information and exchange of views with the various users of the common.

Other means of communication with the public include lectures to various local interest groups and stalls at community events. While it is not a primary measure of satisfaction it is of significance that there are very few complaints made about the Conservators or the way the land is managed either directly to the Conservators or to the Council. The feedback from residents and supporters at outside events is usually very positive.

In 2021 the Conservators introduced a programme of guided walks on the Commons. These have been well received by the local community, each walk has been fully booked and all have been highly regarded.



We are fortunate to have a network of volunteers who help to clear litter on the Commons, act as our eyes and ears on the ground and report concerns. This winter, we are looking to launch practical conservation volunteering on Banstead Commons and have applied for community grants to assist with the cost of hand tools and equipment.

PREMISES, PLANT AND EQUIPMENT

The Conservators own a depot which is situated on Walton Oaks Estate. The Depot is used to store equipment and acts as a workshop for our staff to carry out the basic routine maintenance on all the plant, equipment and materials.

The major items of plant and equipment are:

- Mitsubishi L200 – used for site inspections, rubbish clearance and transportation of tools.
- New Holland Agricultural Tractor (large)
- New Holland Agricultural Tractor (small)

Range of attachments for the tractors including:

- Ride on Mower
- Timberwolf Chipper used for clearing waste and providing wood-chips to stabilise and surface rides and paths
- Trailer
- Major Jungle Buster Destroyer used for scrub clearance
- Spearhead Topper x 2 large flails used for cutting ground vegetation for path, track and field cutting
- Cut n collector used for managing grassland areas
- Post Driver for boundary posts and for grazing compounds

In addition, there are numerous smaller power tools including, mowers, chain saws, brush cutters, which are all essential for effective land management.

FUNDING

The Conservators are a statutory body and not a registered charity. Our Act prevents us from raising income from Banstead Commons and any monies raised from the Commons, through leases, wayleaves and licencing, goes directly to the landowner, Reigate and Banstead Borough Council.

Up until recent years, Reigate and Banstead Council provided the Conservators with ninety percent of their funding, with the remainder coming from London Borough of Sutton, Countryside Stewardship grant and Highways Maintenance.

In 2001 we became eligible for and successfully applied for Single Farm Payment, this was an EU-funded grant. Slightly later, we successfully applied for a ten year DEFRA Higher Level Stewardship grant, which meant that RBBC were able to significantly reduce their contribution to the Conservators. In recent years, RBBC's contribution has covered just over half of our revenue costs with the remainder coming from the above two grants.



There have been significant changes to the way that rural payments are paid to farmers and landowners following Brexit. New pilot schemes have been launched; however, replacement grants are not available for common land until at least 2024 and are unlikely to be as generous as in the past.

With no significant external options until at least 2024, to be able to continue operating as we do now until then, BCC requires additional funding to support operational costs.

The Conservators are grateful for and welcome the current dialogue that we have with the Leader of the Council to address our funding deficit and future operations. We believe that this is an opportunity to establish a Service Level Agreement that addresses our points of difference, recognising that the statutory role is still very much relevant and cannot be dissolved.

IMPROVEMENTS TO SERVICES

Banstead Commons have been actively managed since the second world war. Recent management objectives focus on accessibility and enhancing visitor experience as well as ensuring the nationally rare habitats are in a favourable condition. Last year, Natural England awarded the parcels of land under Higher Level Stewardship a favourable citation which confirms specific features targeted in land management prescriptions are being met.

Over the past two years the Conservators have reviewed their operations to establish if there are improvements to be made to the services we provide. We have connected with and made comparisons against similar bodies operating in the South East. Whilst none are directly comparable due to landscapes, management priorities and staff structures, we have discovered that all are more expensive per acre than Banstead Commons Conservators.

It is worth noting that our research highlighted that in the absence of an inhouse operational team, management costs are likely to increase as we become reliant on contractors. In time, if the funding gap isn't addressed, this could have a significant detrimental impact on the effective and proactive management of Banstead Commons.

Areas identified for improvement are:

Visitor engagement and accessibility. The Conservators would like to introduce interpretation boards on each of the four commons and update and redesign our website.

Development of Site Management Plans. Legally, it is the landowner's responsibility to produce Site Management Plans. The Conservators have recently applied to the CIL Local Fund to work collaboratively with the Greenspaces Team and an external agency to develop Site Management Plans for each of the four sites. Site Management Plans will provide an overview of the ecology of each site and management prescriptions over a ten year period.

Work collaboratively with local agencies and corporates. The Conservators have started to connect with other agencies operating in the area such as the Surrey Hills Society and Farming in Protected



Landscapes programme to maximise funding opportunities, improve public engagement and introduce volunteer opportunities on Banstead Commons.

THE FUTURE

The priorities for the Conservators over the next three years are as follows:

- Formalise our funding and working relationship with Reigate and Banstead Borough Council through the development of a Service Level Agreement with a minimum of a five-year term.
- Develop Site Management Plans for each of the four sites. The Conservators recently applied to The CIL Local Fund for the commission of new Site Management Plans to be drawn up for each of the four sites that make up Banstead Commons.
- Update our website and design and install interpretation boards on all four of the Commons.
- Diversify funding and apply for grants to cover projects and specific habitat improvement as identified in the Management Plans.
- Organise a campaign to acknowledge our 130th Anniversary 2023.

The Conservators were established in 1893 and are part of the cultural and historical makeup of Banstead.

Our Act was formed to protect Banstead Commons from encroachment and development.

We celebrate our 130th Anniversary next year and plan to continue to protect and enhance Banstead Commons for future generations to enjoy and wildlife to thrive!

"Banstead Heath is simply spectacular."

Georgina Terry, Lead Adviser Surrey at Natural England

"I grew up in Banstead and am a bit gutted that I never knew such a wonderful place existed. Banstead Downs is a precious site with such floristic diversity. It was an amazing experience to see so many Chalkhill Blues and Brimstones. It was simply one of the best days ever that I've had butterfly spotting!"

Mrs Nicola Campana-Etheridge, Local Resident

"The appreciation of preserving what we have is becoming ever more important. Banstead Commons Conservators must be very proud of the work you do to encourage biodiversity on Banstead Downs. I would like to openly express this and share a few of the pictures I have taken this week."

Mr John Buckland, Local Resident
