

Minutes of the

MEETING OF THE BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST

1430, Monday 13 November 2006
Ashdown Forest Centre

Present Mr P. Glyn (in the Chair), Cllr J. Barnes, Cllr F. Brown, Mr L. Gillham, Mr F. Marshall, Cllr R. Parsons, Dr H. Prendergast (Clerk), Cllr S. Radford-Kirby, Mr J. Spicer, Cllr R. Stogdon, Mr R. Thornely-Taylor and Cllr F. Whetstone.

Minutes taken by Mrs R. Marriott.

The Chairman opened the meeting and welcomed the members of the public present

ITEM 1 Apologies for absence

1 Apologies were received from Mr M. Cooper, Cllr D. Elkin, Cllr R. St. Pierre and Cllr A. Reid.

ITEM 2 To approve the Minutes of the Meeting held on 18 September 2006 and matters arising

- 2.1 It was agreed that the Minutes of each Board meeting would be circulated to the Chairman as soon after the meeting as possible as with Minutes of Committee meetings. If no amendments were made, the Minutes would be posted on the web site as unadopted until passed at the subsequent Board meeting. They would then remain on the web site as adopted Minutes for information.
- 2.2 The Chairman drew the Board's attention to 6.2.8 which should have been in bold type; the ratification of the HLS agreement being a major policy decision of the Board. It was amended to read "**Mr Glyn proposed ratification of the HLS agreement which had been signed by the Clerk under the authority of the Urgency Committee dated 20 November 2000.**"
- 2.3 At 6.2.9, the Minute should be amended to read: "A two year forecast should be produced when HLS funds were established."
- 2.4 Cllr Barnes pointed out that it was not he who would be leading the working party to review staffing requirements.
- 2.5 8.2 Public participation at Committee and Board meetings
 - 2.5.1 A discussion took place over the different approaches to public participation at Parish Council, Wealden District and County Council meetings. As the public has no authority, any discussion need not be Minuted but the questions may be listed. It was felt that the amount of time given could not be determined at this stage; a trial period of six months was agreed with the timing being at the discretion of the meetings' Chairman.
 - 2.5.2 The process for public participation is one of the aspects to be considered by 3KQ. Ultimately, the process will be included in the new Standing Orders which are currently being redrafted by the Clerk.
- 2.6 The Chairman moved the adoption of the Minutes with the amendments. This was agreed.

ITEM 3 To approve the Minutes of the Conservation Committee Meeting held on 25 September 2006

- 3.1 The Minutes of the last Meeting had been previously circulated. Mr Gillham took questions.
- 3.2 Mr Whetstone sought clarification of the term “Favourable condition” in relation to the Forest’s heathland. The Clerk explained that Natural England judge the condition of the vegetation by set criteria.
- 3.3 The Clerk confirmed that Mr Marrable had received a proposal for a baseline archaeological survey from Dr Woodcock. There had been no indication yet of the success or otherwise of the bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund by the High Weald Unit for the Forest Ridge project submitted in September 2006.
- 3.4 There being no further comments, Mr Glyn moved the adoption of the Minutes. This was agreed.

ITEM 4 To receive the Minutes of the Roads, Planning and Amenity Committee Meeting held on 9 October 2006

- 4.1 The Minutes had been previously circulated. Mr Marshall took questions.
- 4.2 Kidds Hill Junction with B2026
 - 4.2.1 The Clerk informed the Board that he had not had a response from Matthews despite sending a recorded letter. Cllr Barnes recalled that it had been agreed that ESCC Highways Department would do the work with the bill being sent to Matthews. If this was not paid, the County Solicitor could be approached for his assistance.
 - 4.2.2 Cllr Parsons recommended that the work be started as soon as possible as other planning applications for the area being serviced by Matthews vehicles were pending.
- 4.3 Volunteer recruitment Mr Spicer offered to attend the Volunteer recruitment evening on 22 November. The Clerk welcomed Mr Spicer’s involvement and explained that Ranger Richard Allum was leading the recruitment drive. Cllr Barnes had hoped to attend but had arranged for the Vice Chairman of ESCC to attend in his place.
- 4.4 Mr Thornely-Taylor queried the planning procedure for Forest signs and barriers. Cllr Parsons said that size was critical. The Clerk said that planning permission had been received for the new entrance signs for the Forest.
- 4.5 Visitor numbers It was pointed out that the Minute should read ... “the Barn is still costing the Board a lot more (ca £12,000/year) than it gains through any income”.
- 4.6 Chelwood Vachery Cllr Barnes suggested that the restoration of the Chelwood Vachery area should be placed on an agenda for discussion. He felt the site could be developed as a special visitor attraction and would be eligible for suitable grants. Eventually it could be a source of income through the sale of leaflets.
- 4.7 There being no further comments, the Minutes were then approved and signed as an accurate record.

ITEM 5 To receive the Minutes of the Finance & General Purposes Committee Meeting held on 6 November 2006

5.1 The Minutes had been previously circulated. Questions were taken by Cllr Parsons.

5.2 Audit of the 2004/2005 Accounts

5.2.1 Cllr Parsons informed the Board that a letter of apology had been received from the Audit Commission and an explanation of the way forward. There were two options: accept the 2004/05 Accounts in the traditional format with a qualifying note to the effect that they did not comply with the Financial Regulatory Standard 17 (FRS 17) rule or resubmit the Accounts in the Limited Audit Regime format that would have to be used for the 2005/2006 Accounts.

5.2.2 Mr Glyn reported that he had been in contact with the Board's accountants; they had not been aware that the Board was in contravention of the FRS 17 rule.

5.2.3 Although a note could be added to the accounts explaining that the problem arises because the cost of having an actuarial valuation of the Conservators' element of the Local Government Pension Scheme would be prohibitive, the first option would still leave the Board open to criticism. If the Board agreed to the qualification, there would be no further cost incurred from the Auditor; if the Board decides on the new format, he could not guarantee how long it would take before the new format was passed.

5.2.4 Cllr Barnes supported Mr Thornely-Taylor's suggestion that both the 2004/2005 and the 2005/2006 accounts be submitted together in the new limited format. The Clerk agreed to pursue this option.

5.2.5 **The Board unanimously agreed the proposal to resubmit the 2004/2005 accounts under the limited audit assurance scheme.**

5.2.6 **Riding Permits The Board agreed the reintroduction of six month riding permits, commencing on 1 April 2007 or 1 October 2007.**

5.3 HLS

5.3.1 It was agreed that the Minute should read that ... "HLS will pay for a) winter restoration work already contracted" ...

5.3.2 The Clerk informed the Board that the Conservation Officer, Mr Marrable, was working with Natural England to develop the work programme.

5.3.3 Mr Thornely-Taylor expressed concern that HLS funds might be used for land purchase. The Clerk explained that HLS would not support land purchase if the land did not contribute to heathland conservation.

5.3.4 **It was agreed that an extra-ordinary Board Meeting should be held early in January so that the Board may discuss the work programme before it is submitted to NE at the beginning of February.**

5.3.5 Cllr Barnes queried the County Council's responsibilities after 2016 when HLS comes to an end. The Clerk explained that by 2016 the Forest heathlands would be in a "favourable condition" and that the target of HLS is to have a financially sustainable plan in place. Cllr Barnes agreed the need to work out an exit strategy.

- 5.3.6 Mr Thornely-Taylor asked what would happen if Natural England (NE) failed to agree the Management Plan. The Chairman thought this very unlikely as all meetings with NE had been very supportive. He pointed out that the current Estimates did not include any HLS funds and reminded the Board that there was an option to withdraw from HLS after five years.
- 5.3.7 Cllr Stogdon asked if the Board would have some indication as to what would happen in ten years time if no further funding was available in view of the fact that there would be higher maintenance costs. The Clerk advised that part of the point of HLS funding is to assess sustainable options such as grazing and how this might contribute to income generation through marketable meat products, and to do a feasibility study on bracken composting along with other income generating schemes.
- 5.3.8 Mr Gillham commented that, in the past, the Forest had traditionally been managed for the Commoners; today, while still being available for Commoners, it was the centre for the Ashdown Forest “Brand”. The Forest was now principally seen as an amenity and of local business benefit.
- 5.3.9 The Chairman commented that, with the widespread stakeholder consultation planned, the introduction of developments would be an evolving process. The next five years had to be negotiated first.
- 5.4 Bye-law contravention The Minute should be amended to read: “£177 were recovered from a Tunbridge Wells man who had previously been cautioned by the Police for fly-tipping on the Forest in August.”
- 5.5 There being no further questions, Mr Parsons moved the adoption of the Minutes. This was agreed.

ITEM 6 Stakeholder engagement – 3KQ governance and operations proposal.

- 6.1 The Chairman drew the Board’s attention to the briefing paper that had been circulated prior to the meeting and added that further papers would be made available before the first stakeholder meeting on 13 January 2007.
- 6.2 Cllr Barnes felt the Board should be careful not to raise expectations; statutes were in place that could not be changed and the Board was operating in a constrained environment. He thought 3KQ should make it clear that some aspects were not for consideration. Mr Spicer agreed and felt the phrase “development of the whole Forest Plan through stakeholder engagement” could be misunderstood.
- 6.3 Cllr Whetstone felt that Board members should be able to attend the stakeholder meetings as observers. Cllr Parsons agreed that the Board should be kept informed but he was concerned that the meetings should not become too full. The Clerk agreed to ask 3KQ why they suggested only three or four stakeholder volunteers to take part in the governance discussion after the first meeting.
- 6.4 The Chairman put the three options to the Board. **The Board agreed to Option Two:**

“Conduct a bounded discussion around governance and operations, as part of the integrated review. Practically speaking this could involve convening a small group of stakeholders to work with a couple of Conservators and a 3KQ facilitator to identify in more detail the issues around governance and administration that people feel need addressing. The

discussion would look at the different types of changes that might be made (small quick changes, and/or more significant longer-term changes) and the implications of these for all involved, as well as the practicality of implementing the changes being suggested. This discussion must acknowledge the current boundaries the Board must operate within, as well as the limitation of people's time for these kinds of discussions. We therefore believe the governance discussion is best had as a separate small meeting after Meeting 1: we might therefore ask for 3-4 volunteers to express interest in this on 13 January, and then choose who attends the discussion to ensure good balance. Decisions to make any changes (or not) however large or small, would remain with the Conservators."

ITEM 7 Any other business

- 7.1 Cllr Brown read a letter from a resident of Chelwood Vachery who had a query about the management of the Forest in that area. The Clerk agreed to respond to the letter.
- 7.2 Cllr Whetstone asked if the Clerk had requested the kerb repairs at the Duddleswell junction of the B2026 and the C3. The Clerk replied that the work had been instigated by the Highways Department of ESCC; the double kerb had been intended to stop lorries cutting the corner and damaging the Forest.

There being no other questions or comments, the public withdrew for the closed session at 1645.

Chairman _____
12 March 2007

Clerk _____