

# COMMUNICATION ON THE FOREST

One of the key ‘messages’ that has come out of Stakeholder Engagement is the need to improve communication from the Board about the Forest – for example its history, management and conservation importance – and facilitating communication back to the Board. Here we set out how communication has taken place previously (*Background*), how it has changed (*Recent changes*) and outlines how it might do so in future (*The future*). Communication is used here in the broadest sense of the word: *from* the Board, the conveying of information and messages through a variety of media and under a variety of ‘sub-titles’, such as face-to-face talks, email and general interpretation and education; and *to* the Board via meetings, letters, phone etc.

Stakeholders for communication with the Board include these general groupings:

- 1) local residents (e.g. in Forest and adjacent parishes, including commoners);
- 2) Forest users, from near and afar;
- 3) Stakeholder organisations and funders of the Forest (e.g. ESCC, WDC, Natural England, Forestry Commission);
- 4) supporters (Friends) and volunteers.

## 1) Public consultation

### *Background*

The greatest level of consultation in recent times surrounded the fencing in of 550 hectares of Forest in the mid 1990s. Consultation took the form of public meetings that, by all accounts, were heated exchanges that failed to change people’s minds and did not allow measured presentations of problems, concerns and solutions. The apparent unpopularity of the Board’s decision did not prevent what most people now perceive as a long-term benefit to the Forest, to commoners, and to visitors for whom the presence of livestock is now an attractive feature of the Forest.

### *Recent changes*

After preparation in 2005, the Board commissioned a scoping study in 2006 of 25 local people selected for their views about the Forest, the first such exercise ever undertaken. Thanks to funding from Natural England as the Forest entered the Higher Level Stewardship scheme in August, this initial work could then allow the Board to follow on to the full-blown stakeholder engagement process that continues to this day. Through 2007, facilitated public meetings were held in seven venues, attracting some 300 people, and other meetings are planned, or are underway, for the rest of the year. Transcripts of all meetings, and a ‘response document’ summarising answers and points made during the meetings, are on the Board’s website ([www.ashdownforest.org](http://www.ashdownforest.org)).

### *The future*

As the current exercise winds down before spring 2008, the Board needs to consider how consultation will develop. Indeed this is the topic of those who continue to meet to discuss governance. The so-called Forest Plan, replacing one of 1993 and building, in style and content, on an annual work plan introduced in 2004 (as an internal document), is currently under development and will be available for public consultation after the Board meeting in November.

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## 2) Forest Centre

### *Background*

The Forest Centre is the main physical site for communication. It is well placed to ‘catch’ visitors from the north and south (via the A22, only a mile away), is on the main approach to the Forest from the west but is relatively obscure to visitors from the east. The Information Barn, open since the early 1980s, is a key place for communicating to the general public. It contains a permanent exhibition covering aspects of e.g. archaeology, habitats, and wildlife, as well as temporary features such as photographic or art shows with

relevance to the Forest. It is open from 1100- 1700 every weekend and Bank Holiday and from 1400-1700 every weekday in the summer months (1 April – 30 September) and ESCC schools half term holidays.

The public can ask questions of volunteers or staff and pick up walks leaflets and other sources of information and purchase a range of items such as books, post cards and identification charts. Some 15,000 + visit it each year.

Since its creation the Centre has attracted schools wanting to give children acquire first-hand experience of the countryside. The number of visits has ranged from 15-30/year.

The Office is open during normal hours and appointments can be made to see staff.

#### *Recent changes*

A persistent complaint over the years has been that the Centre is hard to find. New entrance signage was therefore installed in 2006 and new 'brown-backed' signs were installed by ESCC at Wych Cross in 2007.

Much emphasis has been given to temporary exhibitions: for example *Documenting change and transition over the past few centuries* (2005), *Winnie-the-Pooh in the landscape* (2006) and *The magic of Ashdown Forest: paintings of flora, fauna and landscape* (2007). A recurrent theme, given a widespread lack of understanding of it, is heathland, the Forest's most distinctive element. Awareness of these exhibitions came through publicity in the local media and invitations to the openings to all members of the Society of Friends of Ashdown Forest (700+ members) and, in the case of the first of these, all commoners and residents of the Forest as well (about 1200 households).

In late 2005 the Board commissioned a business plan for the whole Centre site. On the basis of general consensus (consultation with local parishes, WDC, ESCC etc.) and their own professional visitor centre expertise, the contractors recommended that the Information Barn should be upgraded considerably if it is to be an effective site for communicating messages about the Forest.

The Board also applied to HLF, via the High Weald Unit, for funds to improve interpretation and educational resources at the Centre. The bid was based partially on an interpretation strategy produced in early 2005 and whose consultees included representatives from parish councils, the Ashdown Forest Riding Association, local businesses, the High Weald Unit and others.

#### *The future*

While the Board has agreed that the Centre needs improving (for example to ease access for disabled people to the Office, currently upstairs), the extent and details of development are still under discussion. Funding from the HLF bid is likely to become available no earlier than 2009. Key messages to be introduced in the new interpretation will be the special nature of the Forest and the need for its management. Although interpretation will include the address of a younger audience, the site still offers great scope for expanding more formal education, perhaps by introducing, or working with, outside expertise. So-called Out-of-classroom Learning is an important way of communicating the wonders of the natural world – of which the Forest is a pre-eminent example in the region.

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## **Board and committee meetings**

### *Background*

Although the Board did not advertise the fact widely, its meetings have always been open to the public. Attendance was either low or non-existent except when issues of wide interest arise, for example the position of hunting on the Forest in the 1990s.

### *Recent changes*

The Board moved its committee meetings to a different venue at the Centre in order to accommodate increasing interest in attendance by the public. In 2006 it resolved to allow the public 10 minutes of

question time at the beginning of each meeting. This change has been formalised into the Board's new Standing Orders.

#### *The future*

The Board is likely to remain open to suggestions for improving or changing public questioning.

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### **Interpretation panels**

#### *Background*

Most visitors to the Forest head for the car parks. Their first exposure to communication from the Board is likely, therefore, to be here rather than at the Centre. Recognising this, the Board erected panels in four of the Forest's 50 car parks in the 1990s.

#### *Recent changes*

Thanks largely to funding from English Nature and the Forestry Commission in 2004 and 2005 respectively, the Board has installed a further 10 car park panels. A 'welcome' panel was also put up in the Forest Centre car park.

#### *The future*

It is likely that the panels above will need replacement (for example updating information) and that electronic media (e.g. using mobiles to phone in for recorded information about a particular site) will become important.

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### **Talks & presentations**

#### *Background*

The Ashdown Forest Act 1974 obliges the Board to hold an annual meeting to oversee the election of commoner Conservators. Those already elected have, as a matter of practice, also gone beyond what is statutorily required by giving talks and answering questions at these meetings (as has the Clerk).

The job description of the Clerk includes giving talks, most of them in the evening to local societies by invitation but also parishes. He also speaks about Forest matters to visiting groups, e.g. Sussex Wildlife Trust, RSPB and ESCC.

#### *Recent changes*

The main change is embedded in the job description of the newest staff post, that of Louise Amos (Close-herded Grazing Project Officer – aka Shepherd), namely that "Community involvement is an essential part of this job", requiring "excellent communication skills". The Board attaches crucial importance to communication in developing this project.

Since 2006 one Ranger has also been doing evening talks.

#### *The future*

The grazing project will develop new ways of interacting and communicating with the public, examples being: a Sheep Walk starting from the Forest Centre and planned for late October (postponed due to F+M Disease); talks to and events at local schools and, perhaps, lambing days when the public can 'meet the flock' (an idea still in gestation). Combined, these events will be a truly innovative form of communication with the public.

## **Direct informal communication**

### *Background; Recent changes; The future*

Members of the public always have, and no doubt always will, approach Forest staff (and contractors) while they are working on the Forest. In the vast majority of cases this is a very positive means of communication for all concerned, staff learning of public perception and *vice versa*. Two cases are outstanding, however. In the winter of 2006/2007 foul, abusive and highly unpleasant language was used against a contractor in one case and Forest staff in the other. Such instances emphasise the importance of Forest staff being trained to be able to deal professionally with the lowest levels of human behaviour and communication!

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## **Walks and information leaflets**

### *Background*

The Board has long had 10 walks leaflets for free distribution to the public, and also leaflets about e.g. archaeology, conservation and commoners rights. Walks leaflets are important means by which visitors can enjoy the Forest and at the same learn something about it, for example why it needs management.

### *Recent changes*

With outside funding five of the above walks leaflets were replaced and improved in 2005/6. Other leaflets have also been improved and stored electronically for the first time. From 2004, commoners and Forest residents have also been sent a 1-2 page newsheet about matters close to the ground, for example non-payment of rates and the bye-law breaches round Forest properties that concern the Board, and a copy of Forest bye-laws. Readers are also invited to contact the Forest Centre if there are, or are likely to be, problems. New residents additionally get a booklet about the Forest and new commoners also receive details of the commoners rights and how to vote in elections.

### *The future*

New leaflets are needed for walks and conservation but will, in time, perhaps be printed on demand (*in situ*) rather than *en masse* by a printer.

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## **Media**

### *Background*

The local area is covered by three separate editions of the *Courier*. Press releases to it were limited in number and exhibitions at the Centre were not advertised. Television programmes have featured the Forest occasionally, and continue to do so.

### *Recent changes*

Email has transformed the ease of communicating with the media. Events or issues on the Forest – e.g. exhibitions, deer casualties – are announced via press releases (via email groups), usually appearing in the *Courier*, and articles written for local magazines. Letters are submitted to editors when the Board needs to respond to articles, reports or other letters. There have been many live or recorded radio and TV news interviews locally and nationally, as well as continuing media interest in the Forest for programmes. On occasions the Board has worked with the press offices of ESCC and WDC.

### *The future*

Communication needs constant development. Building relationships with the local journalists will remain important although these will no doubt continue to turn over at a fast rate.

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## **Site notices**

### *Background*

These have been put up *in situ* for many years, but not in all cases, prior to work being carried out. On the whole there was very little feedback.

### *Recent changes*

More notices have been put up and better ones, due to improved hardware and software. The upgrading of the Centre computer system and software Public information notices explaining present and upcoming works

### *The future*

The Board is planning to put up notices of proposed work further in advance than hitherto so that there is time for public feedback.

## **Website**

### *Background*

In the late 1990s the Board had a page on the ESCC website.

### *Recent changes*

In 2004 the Board developed its own website in-house. Through 2005 and 2006 more pages were added, largely through voluntary support, and latterly a fundamental re-design was done. In 2007, a contractor was hired to continue improvements in presentation and navigation, and staff built up their own web-editing expertise to added increasing volumes of information. In July a daily blog was introduced for one project, with a facility to take comments online.

The website now has a considerable body of information, including news and events and, increasingly, notice of future events and activities. Due to increased office capacity and expertise, documents are

### *The future*

The website will continue to grow and be used. Blogs, or other forms allowing online interaction, could extend to further arenas of activity than the grazing project.

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## **Newsletters**

### *Background*

Historically the Board's only newsletter was an A4 one for volunteers, printed 3-4 times/year.

### *Recent changes*

In 2006, the volunteers newsletter, which had expanded to several pages and included photographs, was transformed into a professionally designed 4 page, colour publication, called *Ashdown Forest Life*, that was distributed to local newsagents, shops, libraries, and village halls as well as mailed to volunteers, parish clerks and others. For the autumn/winter 2006 issue the size was reduced to A5 (portrait) and the print-run increased to 5000. Copies were mailed to all Friends, commoners and Forest residents (ca 1500 in total) as well as via the network established before. These two issues had been written and compiled by the Clerk but for the spring/summer issue 2007 and the autumn/winter issues 2007 an experienced contractor was hired. All issues are now put on the website as pdfs. *Ashdown Forest Life* is the Board's opportunity to present information in its own way, independent of the media.

### *The future*

It is anticipated that *Ashdown Forest Life* will continue and to incorporate developments such as letters pages or ideas submitted by readers.

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