

**Minutes of the
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF
ASHDOWN FOREST**

**1600, Thursday, 21 August 2008
Lancaster Room, Ashdown Forest Centre**

Present: Cllr J Barnes (Chairman), Mr P Glyn, Dr H Prendergast and Mr R Thornely-Taylor.

Also present: Mr C Marrable and Mrs F Temple. The Minutes were taken by Mrs R Marriott.

24/08 Cllr Barnes summarised the reasons for calling the meeting:

- i) The need resolve the long term situation with regards to the HLS budget following the confusion over the recent reduction in the half yearly payment from the Rural Payments Agency (RPA)
- ii) Adjust the overall budget for the current financial year to meet the predicted shortfall.

25/08 HLS budget

25.1/08 Mr Marrable briefed the meeting on the background to the situation. See Brief below.

25.2/08 Mr Marrable stated that he had established, with the help of Jane Mortimer of NE, that the area of heathland is *circa* 1576 hectares. It was agreed that a formal letter stating who has authority to sign agreements on behalf of NE is vital, and top priority should be given to obtaining a formal, legal agreement with NE, as part of DEFRA, establishing the definitive map with the area of heathland eligible for payment. In addition, NE is to be asked to define the process for supplementary project funding. Cllr Barnes stressed that both were important for the audit trail and for estimating purposes.

25.3/08 Although Dr Prendergast stated that Mr Seymour of NE had assured him that the claim for the restitution of funds would be sent within the next week, the Committee thought it prudent to explore where cuts could be made in the HLS budget should the funds not be banked before the winter contracts started. Dr Prendergast stated that there was already a £13K contingency fund and this, together with the inhouse projects amounting to £28K that could be postponed, would be sufficient to cover the shortfall for this year and, if necessary, the winter contracts, amounting to £34K could be delayed. It was agreed that expenditure on the £28K projects should be postponed until the matter was resolved and, if necessary, contractors should be contacted towards the end of September with a request to delay their start dates.

25.4/08 It was agreed that it would be helpful to show project budgets separately from general HLS costs. Mrs Temple explained that inhouse staff time was shown as an F&GP expense and VAT on HLS expenditure would have to be shown separately due to its variable nature.

26/08 Revision of General Budget

26.01/08 Mrs Temple briefed the meeting on the adjustments that had been made to the budget following the identification of a shortfall in income and a greater than expected expenditure.

26.02/08 It was agreed that the student who was working on a contractual basis should be taken on as temporary staff with the corresponding allocation to the budget.

26.3/08 It was agreed that revised budget should be put to the Board for its approval and a copy of the revised budget sent to ESCC for information.

26.4/08 Mr Marrable agreed to keep Mr Barnes informed of any developments during Dr Prendergast's absence on annual leave.

The meeting closed at 1730.

Signed

Chairman

8 September 2008

Brief

1. Our original application was for 1400 ha of heathland to be included in the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme (HLS). This figure was derived from estimates of the percentage of heathland in each of approx. 20 fields covering the Forest. The heathland was hand-coloured on large scale maps provided by the Rural Land Registry (RLR). The colouring-in was based on the heathland vegetation on the Forest mapped in accurate GIS vegetation surveys. The first problem was the failure of the RLR to accept our GIS mapping.

2. The signed HLS Agreement (31/07/06) was for an area of 1346 ha of heathland, with a covering letter saying that 3 fields with heathland components totalling nearly 200 ha had been omitted and would be added subsequently. The second problem was the repeated, and continuing, inability of the RLR to get the area of Conservators' land correct; at one point, all the Forest area was lost from their computer and they denied that we had registered any land at all, despite them having sent us maps that confirmed the Forest was registered.

3. The next Agreement (undated) was for 1567 ha heathland, now including the 3 missing fields. This is the figure on which the payment was made i.e. £200 x 1567, in the first year of the HLS, and is the amount expected for the second year. This is higher than the figure that we applied for, but I assumed that it was because the RLR had now digitised our colouring maps and come to a more accurate figure.

4. It turns out that the 1567 ha was not just the 1346 ha plus the missing fields but included duplication of some fields already in the HLS. This is the duplication referred to in the 11th August letter from NE. In fact, the letter over-simplifies what has happened to the Forest fields. It is possible in retrospect to track this error between the 2 Agreements. In the second Agreement, 2 new fields appeared, amalgamations of existing fields. The 1567 ha was made up of both the new fields plus the original fields, which should have disappeared. Hence the duplication of areas and over-payment. This area was not queried here because it was coincidentally close to the anticipated area.

5. The RLR, for reasons unknown to us, is continuously fiddling with the boundaries of fields. We have received 9 letters advising us of multiple field number or boundary changes, which are impossible for us to record because they do not include maps. The third problem is the RLR field changes – the duplication is entirely their fault.

6. The short-term solution has been described elsewhere. The long-term solution is to have an Agreement independent of RLR field maps. This is already under way and initial figures agreed with NE. The Forest will be split approx. into the following categories: heathland (1576 ha), woodland eligible for woodland grant, as opposed to ‘woodland within heathland’ (780 ha), golf course (115 ha). The heathland figure is close to that arrived at in the second Agreement.

7. In effect, the earlier payments received were more or less correct but for the wrong reasons.