

## **Minutes of the Residents meeting held at the Ashdown Forest Centre on Tuesday, 12 July 2016 at 19:00**

Present: Ten residents signed the attendance register, eight Conservators, and two members of staff attended the meeting.

The Minutes were taken by the Clerk, Mrs Kirsty Dirs

### **1. Welcome and introduction from the Chairman of the Board of Conservators – Cllr Richard Stogdon**

Cllr Stogdon opened the meeting, welcoming all present and introduced himself. He explained the order of the meeting and advised there would be an opportunity for questions at the end of the meeting.

Cllr Stogdon presented the Forest's achievements and highlights for the year:

- A 10 Year Funding programme, Countryside Stewardship, with Natural England. This almost doubles funding through this source and makes us a Million Pound undertaking
- To justify this funding we must meet many targets and challenges. As a result we have put together a Five Year Conservation Plan
- A major review of Ashdown Forest Governance
- Education programme SPARK award
- Prestigious 'Queen's Award' for voluntary service
- Bye-law fine increased to Standard Scale 2 (a fine not exceeding £500)
- BBC Countryfile feature on Ashdown Forest in March 2016

### **2. Report from the Chairman of the Conservation Committee – Mr John Francis**

Mr Francis explained the Conservators had entered a new 10 year Countryside Stewardship Scheme. The Countryside Stewardship funding (estimated to be in the region of £550,000 per annum) is a significant contribution to the Forest. Mr Francis explained the funding was ring-fenced for a large number of conservation projects which the Conservators must undertake in order to meet the criteria of the plan. He further advised that only grazing can produce the habitat diversity of high quality heathland that the Conservators and Natural England seek to maintain.

Mr Francis then spoke of the success of a recent trial deer cull and the forthcoming recruitment of a Deer Coordinator, whose role would be to reduce and manage the deer population at a sustainable level to ensure favourable condition of woodland and heathland. They would further look to consider the provision of a meat larder and processing facility.

Mr Francis continued that the controlled burning of gorse and the removal of non-native species are current tasks being undertaken by the team and that the trialling of the new invisible fencing system for cattle had unveiled some teething issues. Mr Francis concluded by thanking the Conservation volunteers for their hard work and dedication.

### **3. Report from the Forest Centre Development Committee (Mr Roy Galley on behalf of Cllr Sylvia Tidy)**

Mr Roy Galley, on behalf of the Chairman of the Forest Centre Development Committee, Cllr Sylvia Tidy, explained two Planning Permissions had been granted to modernise the centre, one of which had been activated. He explained that in light of the current Governance Review, all fundraising/grant requests were on hold, however grants had been received from the Ashdown Forest Trust, Ashdown Forest Conservation Trust and Low Carbon Workspaces for installation of Solar Panels and insulation and double glazing for the Education Barn.

Mr Galley continued that during the winter and following a number of problems with the heating and hot water system at the Forest Centre, the boiler was decommissioned for safety reasons. A new heating and hot water system had since been installed and he thanked staff for their patience working in difficult conditions. The next project is to consider planning consent for a permanent wood store.

#### **4. Report from the Chairman of the Finance and General Purposes Committee – Mr Tony Reid**

Mr Reid explained the objectives of the Finance and General Purposes Committee and their responsibility for management of the general Forest budget and as an HR function. He explained that funding was received from a number of sources and organisations, including grants from East Sussex County Council, Wealden District Council, charity grants, fees from the Golf Club and Wayleaves.

Mr Reid advised the organisation was now functioning at a turnover of almost £1million per annum with a day to day general operational budget of £360,000. He further explained that the Countryside Stewardship funding worked to a calendar year and not a tax year which was proving to be rather challenging and payments received from the Countryside Stewardship programme are paid in arrears.

#### **5. Report from the Chairman of the Roads, Planning and Amenities Committee – Mr John Spicer**

Mr Spicer introduced himself and explained the role of the Roads, Planning and Amenities Committee was part police force and part civil service, operating to protect the Forest from encroachment and regulate the Forest as a place of amenity and resort as stipulated in the 1974 Act. He explained the Committee's responsibility was By-law breaches, Forest encroachments, licences, planning, and memorials and whilst he preferred to take a pragmatic view in order to reach agreement with individual parties, Legal Services at East Sussex County Council provided enforcement support with persistent offenders.

Mr Spicer advised that a large debt remained outstanding from the collection of Acknowledgement Rent from the Perpetual Licence and explained that the terms of the Licence allowed for debts to be pursued through legal action. Mr Spicer closed by asking residents to be vigilant and report any issues.

#### **6. Question and Answer session**

Mrs Helen Bardsley explained she was a horse rider on the Forest and expressed concern that some of the rides had not been cut back and there were low overhanging branches. She commented that some rides were impassable.

Mr Francis asked Mrs Bardsley to identify the rides of particular concern and Mrs Bardsley confirmed the rides of concern were mainly on the East Chase, particularly the bridge over the river by Wrens Warren on the B2026/B2818 where there are overhanging branches and that thick Holly on the Weald Way by Black Hill made the ride impassable. There was also thick Holly by Five Hundred Acre Wood and the ride opposite Roman car park (Pylons) was very narrow. Mrs Bardsley confirmed she was happy to give further detail to the team.

Mr Nigel Champness questioned the ability for residents to provide more financial assistance to the Forest through the payment of rates. He explained he only paid a very small fee for the use of his roadway across the Forest and would be happy to contribute more.

The Clerk explained that the old Roadway Licences allowed for a peppercorn rent and were non-transferable. She continued that the Perpetual Licence had preceded the Roadway Licence and was approved by the Council of Mortgage Lending Companies. The rights within an existing Perpetual Licence are fully transferable on sale of the property and will thereafter remain with the Deeds of the property. The fee for the Perpetual Licence was much higher given the considerable work it involved and the Acknowledgement Rent was in line with the regularised charges by the Government and levied by the owners of Common Land.

Mr Ray Parsons confirmed he was a recipient of the Forests' e-news service and asked whether a similar medium could be set up for Forest residents to communicate. He gave his thanks to the Commoners for opening up a number of Governance meetings to the Forest residents and questioned whether the Board were confident that Brexit had no impact on the Countryside Stewardship contract.

Mr Francis confirmed that the Countryside Stewardship funding was a contract between DEFRA and the Conservators and there was a specific contract agreement in place.

Mrs Janet Wirdnam suggested there was a need to maintain the surface at some Forest car parks. She explained that large pot holes were making access for small cars difficult, particularly in Long, Black Hill, King Standing and Broadstone.

Mr Reid confirmed there was a budget for car park maintenance but money was not available to resurface all 49 car parks and the team would be tackling the urgent car parks first, including the car parks Mrs Wirdnam had reported. Mr Reid further advised that various methods of filling the potholes were being trialled with different aggregates and compound mixes.

### **7. Closing remarks – Cllr Richard Stogdon**

Cllr Stogdon explained the challenges which lay ahead, including the completion of the Governance Review and the need to manage finances carefully and professionally. Cllr Stogdon thanked everyone for coming and closed the meeting at 20:10.