

Minutes of the Residents meeting held at the Ashdown Forest Centre on Tuesday, 11 July 2017 at 19:00

Present: 17 residents signed the attendance register, five Conservators, and three 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 clarified the order of the meeting and advised there would be an opportunity for questions at the end of each item.

2. Report from the Chairman of the Conservation Committee – Mr Philip Glyn

Mr Glyn introduced himself and clarified the role of the Conservation Committee. He explained the Conservators are currently grazing their full quota of acreage from two fencing allowances; one from the 1974 Ashdown Forest Act of 100 acres and a dispensation from the Commons Act of 20 acres. Mr Glyn continued that the Invisible Fencing trial had generated a number of technical issues but confirmed that there is still a role for invisible fencing to target grazing with the back-up of a perimeter fence. Mr Glyn advised that experts had met early June to review progress of the invisible fencing trial.

Mr Glyn then spoke of the findings of the Wealden District Council (WDC) Visitor Survey conducted in June 2016 (with the report published in December 2016) and that an estimated 4541 visits were made to Ashdown Forest every day, which equated to almost 1.5 million vehicle movements per year.

Mr Glyn then spoke of the success of a recent trial deer cull and the findings of the deer exclusions sites showing the gravity of how deer grazing affects the Forest environment, commenting that a rogue gene had entered the deer population and that Bucks need to be managed. Mr Glyn explained the potential for future venison sales and a meat processing facility.

Mr Glyn concluded his presentation by remarking on the positive increase in the orchid population which had flourished as a result of grazing the heathland.

Question and Answer session

Mr Glyn was asked where the 4,500 visitors come from and if the vast majority within 9km? Mr Glyn confirmed that the concentration of daily visitors were from Crowborough, Forest Row and East Grinstead, most of whom had one dog.

A member of the public asked whether the Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space (SANGS) initiative was due to concern raised by the number of visitors to the Forest. Mr Glyn explained that SANGS are funded by the local District Council to encourage people (often dog walkers) to use sites other than the Forest for recreational purposes and that when people do visit the forest their impact on the SPA is reduced. Pat Buesnel elaborated that it was difficult to balance encouraging visitors and protecting the Forest.

Mrs Cox asked whether it was possible to exclude people from certain areas. Mr Glyn responded that whilst it would be desirable to funnel people to the same area to spare other areas, the Conservators do not have the authority or the ability to close any part of the Forest, although it was possible to close car parks.

Mrs Cox further enquired about burning gorse and Mr Glyn explained that whilst burning had been successful, logistically it was very difficult to manage and burning needs to be followed up with grazing.

3. Report from the Forest Centre Development Committee (Cllr Sylvia Tidy)

Cllr Tidy introduced herself and explained it had been a quiet and somewhat frustrating year for the Forest Centre Development Committee, but that the Committee were on track with plans for a new sewage upgrade and wood store. Cllr Tidy explained that the new wood store was needed to ensure the wood for the boiler did not get damp and the wood was stored at the correct level of dryness to ensure the boiler warranty was not invalidated.

Cllr Tidy continued that the Tractor Shed needed extending and that a grant had been received from Wealden District Council to redevelop the kitchen.

Cllr Tidy concluded by thanking the Ashdown Forest Conservation Trust for their help in funding the sewage works and the wood store.

Question and Answer session

Mrs Bardsley asked whether the improvements to the kitchen would include a double catering sink. Ms Buesnel confirmed the plans included a double sink and a separate hand washing sink.

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. He explained the Forest was functioning at a turnover of almost £1million per annum with a day to day general operational budget of approximately £500,000 for core functions and approximately £500,000 from the Countryside Stewardship grant.

Mr Reid advised that addressing the Forest Governance would influence how the new corporate body may operate, including the ability to trade and fundraise and explained the Conservators are hoping to secure financial assistance from local Parishes looking to make a positive contribution to the Forest. 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.

Mr Reid concluded by expressing the reliance on the support of Wealden District Council, East Sussex County Council and the Friends of Ashdown Forest.

Question and Answer session

There were no questions.

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. He advised the Committee's responsibility was mainly Bye-law breaches and Forest encroachments and expressed his wish for the residents to become more involved in assisting the Conservators by reporting breaches. Mr Spicer spoke of his frustration at the constant battle with fly-tipping, cyclists and out of control dogs. Mr Spicer continued that Bye-law breach data is now captured as part of Management Information where it is possible to analyse trends.

Question and Answer session

Mr Vivian expressed his dismay at the cycling issue at Tompsets Bank, where youths had created cycle paths and jumps and had removed Bye-law signage. Mr Spicer responded that it was crucial to educate Forest users and he hoped to tackle the issue by liaising with schools in the area.

A member of the public stated that the litter dropped by Duke of Edinburgh students was completely unacceptable and they should clear up after themselves. Mr Spicer suggested an appeal should be made to schools.

7. Closing remarks – Cllr Richard Stogdon

Cllr Stogdon explained that originally the Board had applied to set up a charitable foundation in June 2014, but the Charity Commission advised the Board there is no power conferred on the Conservators under the 1974 Act to create new bodies.

Cllr Stogdon confirmed challenges lay ahead with the new governance arrangements but that positive progress had been made and that the Charity Commission has now agreed in principle, a Charitable Company Limited by Guarantee (CCLG) may be established to handle the general management of the Forest and develop a trading and fundraising platform. Cllr Stogdon explained that the Conservators had been independently advised that the most suitable vehicle would be a CCLG and the proposal had generally been met with reassurance.

Question and Answer session

Mr Mawdsley asked whether the Articles of Association and objectives would be issued for public comment and whether the public could have further input. Cllr Stogdon responded that it was for the Board to agree and approve the Articles.

A member of the public asked whether under the new governance arrangements, East Sussex County Council (ESCC) would still provide funding. Cllr Stogdon answered that the Conservators needed to raise significant funds and that the contribution from ESCC provided 18% of current funding.

A member of the public asked whether the new organisation would have their own treasure and Cllr responded they would.

Mr Vivian welcomed the work that had been achieved to date on governance arrangements.

General Question and Answer session

A question was raised in relation to the speed limit on the Forest and the number of HGV's on the Forest. There was some discussion on whether the speed limit was enforceable and whether the police could prosecute offenders.

A further question was raised with regards to the Conservators sponsoring electric cars and installing car charging points across the Forest.

Mr Vivian proposed a vote of thanks to both Cllr Stogdon and Ranger Mike Yates and wished Ranger Yates well for his forthcoming retirement.

The meeting closed at 20:16