



Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Conservators of Ashdown Forest
Monday 12 July 2021 at 14:00
VIRTUAL MEETING - MS TEAMS

Present: Mr C Smith (Chairman), Ms S McAll (Vice Chairman), Mr C de Mestre, Mr N Mawdsley, Mr A Reid, Mrs R St Pierre, Cllr P Roundell, Cllr P Pragnell, Mr R Stogdon, Mrs S Tidy, Ms F Thomas, Mrs L Maudslay, Mrs E Riminton-Drury, Mr J Squire and Cllr J Howell

In attendance: Mr J Adler (CEO) and Mrs K Dirs (Clerk)

Minutes were taken by the Clerk

Members of the public present: Ms S Way

	Item	Action
	The Chairman opened the meeting and welcomed members of the public	
	<p>Questions from the public:</p> <p><u>Susanna Way:</u> <i>What plans does the team have to engage with small investors and interested individuals? I am a small investor and feel that I should have some contact in the form of an Emailed Newsletter or similar, to tell me how I am helping the Forest and what more I can do.</i></p> <p><u>Response:</u> The Chairman thanked Ms Way for her contribution and advised that wider fundraising communications hinged on the production of a vision and strategic plan. The Clerk explained the Forest's communication channels, including publications in local magazines that were distributed by Royal Mail to around 35,000 people.</p>	
16/21	Apologies	
	There were none. Cllr Hardy was unable to gain access to the virtual meeting	
17/21	Welcome and introductions to new Board Members	
	<p>The Chairman welcomed Members and declared the meeting open.</p> <p>The Chairman briefly explained that the agenda would be re-ordered and item 26/21 would be taken before item 25/21 to allow the Board to consider whether it was applicable to suspend Standing Order 1.2 as one of the candidates for election had been Vice Chair within the last three-year period. Mrs Riminton-Drury sought clarification how often Standing Orders were suspended without notice and the Chairman advised Standing Orders had historically been suspended in the rare situation where it was necessitated.</p> <p>The Chairman introduced new Board members, Cllr Pragnell, Cllr Howell, Mrs Maudslay, Mrs Riminton-Drury, Mr Squire and Ms Thomas and existing Board members gave brief introductions.</p> <p>The Board recorded a vote of thanks to retiring Conservator John Spicer observing his dedication and commitment to the Board and staff team over two decades. Mr Spicer had provided considerable assistance with encroachments and Bye-law breaches in his role as Vice Chair of the Roads, Planning and Amenity Committee and latterly as Vice Chair of the Finance and Regulatory Committee.</p>	
18/21	Declarations of any interest by Members of a Personal or Prejudicial Nature	
	Mr de Mestre declared he is a commoner grazier and receives the BPS payment	

19/21	<p>To approve the minutes of the Board meeting of 15 March 2021</p> <p>The minutes had been circulated and assessed by the Board for accuracy. The Chairman reported that The Ashdown Forest Foundation had held its AGM in May and appointed three new independent trustees: Kathryn Aalto, Jonathan Mills and Robin St Clair Jones. The minutes were duly received and were approved in accordance with Standing Order 2.6</p>	
20/21	<p>To receive the minutes of the Programme Committee of 17 May 2021</p> <p>The minutes had been circulated and assessed by the Board for accuracy. Mr Mawdsley summarised the minutes and confirmed the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) had released payment of £366k in relation the Countryside Stewardship (CS) grant but the remainder of the grant was being withheld whilst the eligibility disagreement in relation to disputed land parcels was investigated. Mr Mawdsley explained that a recruitment process was underway by Wealden District Council (WDC) to appoint a SAMMS Officer in July and concluded that the CEO would be undertaking a grazing review. The minutes were duly received and were approved in accordance with Standing Order 2.6</p>	
21/21	<p>To receive the minutes of the Finance and Regulatory Committee of 14 June 2021</p> <p>The minutes had been circulated and assessed by the Board for accuracy. Mr de Mestre summarised the financial position and confirmed receipt of £70k from ESCC categorised as a Covid-19 relief payment. He advised that the 2021/22 budget had been prepared before the full outcome of the staff restructure had been finalised and accordingly, an adjustment to operational expenses included a deferred pension liability extending to 2023/24 and that budgeted staff costs were £36k lower than previously estimated and restructuring costs were £7k higher. The minutes were duly received and were approved in accordance with Standing Order 2.6</p> <p>Mr de Mestre then addressed the Statutory Documents explaining that, in accordance with the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015, the Board is required to sign off annual accounts by 30 June and these accounts need to be published by 01 July; failure to do so may result in a qualified audit. Mr de Mestre reassured Members that in light of the missed publication deadline and delayed authorisation, any such qualification would only be considered a technical administrative breach. This had been considered with advice from the appointed auditors.</p> <p><u>21.1/21 To approve the Statement of Accounts Year ending 31 March 2021</u> The Board agreed the Statement of Accounts</p> <p><u>21.2/21 Internal Audit Report; to consider the effectiveness of the system of internal control</u> The Internal Audit report was presented to the Board. Mr de Mestre explained there was an anomaly recording stock on Sage which resulted in the year-end balance showing a cumulative net amount of opening and closing balances over the year. A further anomaly had been identified whereby Forest Rates/Rents posted to Sage may include outstanding arrears for previous years. The Chairman explained that tighter reconciliation between internal databases was recognised by the staff and they would work to address these issues. The Board considered the effectiveness of the system of internal control and noted that there were not any significant comments</p> <p><u>21.3/21 Annual Return (Section 1): To consider and approve the Annual Governance Statement 2020/21</u> The CEO read out the Governance Statements and sought approval from the Board for each individual statement. The Board considered and approved all Annual Governance Statements</p> <p><u>21.4/21 Annual Return (Section 2): To consider the Accounting Statements 2020/21</u> The CEO asked the Board to consider the Accounting Statements. The Board considered and agreed the Accounting Statements</p> <p><u>21.5/21 Annual Return (Section 2): To approve and sign the Accounting Statements 2020/21</u></p>	

	The Board approved the Accounting Statements, which were signed by the Chairman on behalf of the Board.	
22/21	Chief Executive's Summary Report	
	<p>The CEO spoke to his report highlighting keys areas of focus; Management, Funding, and Vision, and informed Members of the opportunity to enter into a collaborative replacement Environmental Land Management Test programme, to protect and enhance not just Ashdown Forest, but the wider landscape that forms such an important part of the local heritage. A final Defra application is to be prepared for the end of September. ACTION: CEO to write to Conservators on this test prior to submission for review and approval.</p> <p>The CEO confirmed a Forest wide Nightjar survey had been undertaken and a minimum population of 37 churring males had been recorded. A large-scale Marsh Gentian survey is being undertaken with the Surrey Botanical Recording Society later in 2021 and Dartford Warbler monitoring is being conducted alongside the Ashdown Forest bird group.</p> <p><i>24.1/21 Update on the staff consultation implementation</i></p> <p>The CEO advised the consultation was in the final stages and contracts had been issued to staff. Four staff members have left the organisation during the process, two through the consultation and another two to alternative organisations. The existing staff new roles begin at the end of July. The CEO acknowledged the work of Executive Committee Members and HR Officers at ESCC bringing the consultation to conclusion.</p> <p><i>24.2/21 Definition of the Vision and Strategic Plan</i></p> <p>The CEO spoke of his draft vision and strategic obligations both in the short and long term, with the emphasis on protecting Ashdown Forest as the largest open-access, wildlife-rich place in the Southeast. The CEO explained that one of the key focuses would be on health, both physical and mental, for all visitors. The CEO concluded the management plan and fundraising strategy would flow once the vision has been embedded in the organisation. ACTION: The CEO to circulate the draft Vision and Strategic Plan to Members and follow up with individual Members directly.</p> <p>The Chairman thanked the CEO for his informative update and emphasised the need for the Vision and Strategic Plan to be agreed by the end of Q3, in order to provide ESCC with a robust Medium Term Financial Plan. The Board agreed to convene an off-site to discuss further as required.</p>	
23/21	Approval of Medium-term Financial Plan	
	<p>The Chairman explained that despite the loss of ESCC grant funding and a reduction of income from the pandemic, more spending is required on environmental and amenity infrastructure delivery given the run down in non-CS income in recent years prior to the challenges of the pandemic. Whilst several income streams had performed better than forecast, finances remain deeply vulnerable and there is a considerable financial challenge ahead to offset the deficit.</p> <p>The CEO suggested that revenue opportunities employed by similar organisations needed to be explored, including the potential for a car park charging scheme which has been recently introduced at Epping Forest (April 2021). The CEO explained Epping had a significant deficit in their management budget. The CEO confirmed that Epping Forest are legally entitled to charge for parking under the powers conferred on them through their Act of Parliament, as is the case with the Ashdown Forest Conservators. Other organisations, similar in constitution, charge for parking.</p> <p>The Board unanimously agreed that further investigation should be given to parking charges and asked the CEO to prepare a feasibility study to establish whether car park charging would be a sustainable source of income to offset the financial pressure on the budget. ACTION: CEO</p>	
24/21	Governance Review	
	<p><i>24.1/21 To consider and approve the establishment of a Governance Working Party</i></p> <p>The Board considered the paper prepared by the Chairman to create a working party to deliberate on the existing Board, Committee structure and delegated authorities, ensuring that it</p>	

	<p>is appropriate and consistent with efficient delivery of a new Strategic Plan. The adoption was carried unanimously. ACTION: The CEO to establish a Working Group to review current Board Delegated Authorities and Scheduling of Board and Committee meetings</p> <p><i>24.2/21 To consider and approve increasing the frequency of Board/Committee meetings</i></p> <p>The Board considered the necessity to increase the frequency of meetings but agreed the matter should be considered by the working party, as whilst an increased frequency of meetings would promote effective working and enhance communications, it would require more staff administration. The motion was proposed by Mr Mawdsley and seconded by Mrs St Pierre and carried unanimously.</p>	
26/21	<p>Election of Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Board</p> <p>Prior to the meeting, electronic nominations were invited for the post of Chairman of the Board. Sylvia Tidy nominated Susan McAll and this was seconded by Colin Smith. There being no other nominations, Susan McAll was duly elected as Chair for a period of twelve months and took the chair.</p> <p>Prior to the meeting, electronic nominations were invited for the post of Vice Chairman of the Board. Chris de Mestre nominated Sylvia Tidy and this was seconded by Tony Reid. Elizabeth Riminton-Drury nominated Rosalyn St Pierre and this was seconded by Cllr Chris Hardy.</p> <p>The Board considered the nomination for Sylvia Tidy given Mrs Tidy had recently served four years as Vice Chair. The Board held a vote to suspend Standing Order 1.2 and the vote returned a majority not in favour of suspending Standing Order 1.2.</p> <p>Rosalyn St Pierre was duly elected as Vice Chair for a period of twelve months.</p>	
25/21	<p>To consider Job Descriptions for the role of Chairman and Vice Chairman</p> <p>The Board considered the Job Descriptions previously circulated and subject to minor amendment they were adopted unanimously.</p> <p>The outgoing Chairman passed on his good wishes to the incoming Chair and Vice Chair and thanked the Board for its patience during a turbulent year.</p> <p>The Chair gave thanks to the outgoing Chairman for his work during the year.</p>	
27/21	<p>Allocation of Board members to Committees</p> <p>To be circulated post meeting. ACTION: Clerk</p>	
28/21	<p>Any urgent Item of which the Clerk has noticed in order to pass to the elected Chairman</p> <p>The CEO noted an earlier reference to a September Board meeting and reminded Members a Board Meeting for September had not been scheduled. September meetings to be arranged ACTION: Clerk</p> <p>There was no other business and the Chair ended the meeting by thanking the Board for their support over the year. The meeting closed at 16:15</p>	

Chairman _____

Clerk _____

27 September 2021