

**Minutes of the
CONSERVATION COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE
BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST**

Monday 5th February 2018

14.00 at the Ashdown Forest Centre

Committee members present: Mr P Glyn (Chairman), Mr J Francis (Vice Chairman), Mr M Cooper, Mrs R St Pierre, Mr C Smith, Cllr R Stogdon (ex-officio), Cllr S Tidy (ex-officio) and Mr S Alton (Conservation Officer).

Co-opted Members/Advisers: Ms J Field (representing Natural England) and Dr N Mawdsley.

Also Present: Cllr F Whetstone, Mr A Reid, Mr R Galley.

Officers Present: Mrs. L Meehan (Finance Officer) Mr J Clow (Forest Centre Office Manager) & Mrs C Fitzgerald (Lead Grazing Officer - for Agenda Item 7 only).

Minutes were taken by Mr J Clow. There were no members of the public present.

07/18 Apologies

Apologies had been received from Mrs P Buesnel (Director), Mrs K Dirs (Clerk), Cllr R O'Keeffe and Mr J Harding.

02/18 Declarations of interest by Members of a Personal or Prejudicial Nature

There were none.

03/18 Matters Arising

03.1/18 Site visit discussion

The site visit was cancelled due to bad weather. The Lead Grazing Officer will rearrange the site visit before the next Conservation Committee meeting on 21st May 2018.

03.2/18 Actions arising from last meeting

The Chairman enquired about progress with the following actions from previous meetings:

1. The Chairman noted that at the Meeting of the Committee in October 2017, the Director had agreed to contact Kristoffer Hewitt of Natural England in regard to access monitoring with a full listing of the various projects included and to express concern particularly in regard to bird monitoring on the Forest and cost and design of the relevant survey. The Chairman asked for the Committee to be updated at the next meeting of the Conservation Committee.
2. Scope for the removal of bracken arisings when the Site Nitrogen Action Plan (SNAP) is discussed at Wealden's Ashdown Forest Officers Forum. **Ms Field (NE) agreed to follow up with a colleague who sits on the Officers Forum.**
3. Spending the Capital Claim for £9,000 under Access (AC1) on interpretive signage and information by 31st December 2017, so the Conservators can claim by 31st May 2018 as required by our CS agreement. The Conservation Officer confirmed the budget had been spent on thirteen signs. The design work had been completed but the signs had yet to be put up.
4. Progress with the removal of Turkey Oak from the Forest. The Conservation Officer confirmed recent receipt of a Felling Licence (expiring Jan 2023) for the planned removal of around 85 Turkey Oaks over the winter months. The trees will be felled in house and taken away by a contractor.
5. Progress with the Heritage Lottery Fund Landscape Partnership application towards this year's deadline (31st May 2018). Cllr Stogdon confirmed the application is on hold until the new company is registered as a charity.

Action

CF

6. Progress by the grazing team preparing a justification paper supporting the breeding programme that can be circulated to the public. **The Conservation Committee agreed to extend the deadline for the Grazing Officer to November 2018**

CF

The chairman noted that failure to carry out actions agreed at these meetings was unacceptable. Mr Galley supported this view.

04/18 Financial Information for the Conservation Committee

04.1/18 Countryside Stewardship budget

The Finance Officer entered the meeting.

Mr Reid highlighted a paper tabled by the Finance Officer detailing the implications of non-payment by Natural England of one year's revenue. The Committee discussed the failure of Natural England to communicate recent changes in contacts at Technical Services, with no indication of when this payment will arrive, or provision of a key contact to take responsibility for financial matters at Natural England.

Mr Reid discussed the estimated expenditure for February amounting to £137,000 including £85,000 in Countryside Stewardship expenditure commitments – much of which had been held back for payment since December when the Countryside Stewardship payment was due. Mr Reid asked for the Committee's involvement in deciding what risks we take honouring payments, with a lack of confidence in future payments being made by Natural England. The Committee also discussed the repercussions should the contract with Natural England be terminated with one year's worth of expenditure to absorb.

Cllr Stogdon proposed drafting a letter to MP Nusrat Ghani asking for the delayed payment to be taken up with the Secretary of State. **The Committee agreed.**

RS

Mr Reid itemised the expenditure planned for February 2018 and sought guidance from the Committee to pay the invoices. Ms Field (Natural England) confirmed the issue had been escalated to a Manager in Technical Services, but that was all she knew. The Chairman enquired whether the delay was the responsibility of Natural England or the Rural Payments Agency. Ms Field confirmed it was a technical issue within Natural England resulting from moving the payment process from offices in Reading to Worcester. Ms Field confirmed the contact at Technical Services as Kirsty Shaw. The Conservation Officer was aware of the named contact, but only had a generic email address. Cllr Tidy proposed contacting the Finance Officer at East Sussex County Council to ask for financial assistance.

The Finance Officer reiterated that our earmarked Reserves [for six months' staff and overhead costs] must be protected. Mr Reid explained that if we honour commitments for February 2018 we will be in deficit and drawing on Reserves. The Chairman highlighted the written reminder from Natural England that included a break clause after five years [2020]. Cllr Whetstone reminded the Committee that we cannot spend Reserves which are protected by Board policy and obligations to the District Auditor. Cllr Whetstone suggested asking the Ashdown Forest Trust for a loan. The Chairman agreed that the landowner is obligated to improve the condition of the SSSI, so the Ashdown Forest Trust has a duty to help.

Mr Reid asked the Committee whether the Finance Officer should be making payments for Contractors and Commoner Graziers to meet financial commitments. Cllr Stogdon expressed his concern supposing the delay continues and asked the Committee whether they were prepared to take the risk of spending on conservation. Mrs St Pierre discussed a duty of care to contractors and the need to honour the Conservators' contractual commitments. The policy of East Sussex County Council is not to distress small businesses and contractors by delaying due payments. The Finance Officer explained if we make the payments now then core Forest finance funds will be spent on Countryside Stewardship contracts, without being in receipt of any funding for the latter. The

Finance Officer considers this a risk, especially as there has not been any written communication from Natural England to explain the delay or indicate when payment will be received. Mrs St Pierre proposed that a letter from the Chair of a Committee was insufficient and that a letter to Natural England regarding the delayed payment from the Chairman of the Board was more appropriate. The Chairman proposed that the Chairman of the Board of Conservators should write to Natural England. **The Committee agreed that Councillor Stogdon should write to Natural England.**

RS

Mr Reid requested action points for managing cash flow over the next twenty days. He discussed the first instalment for the new tractor and explained that the old tractor is planned to be part exchanged. Cllr Tidy thought that we should go ahead with the tractor purchase, because the value of the old tractor is diminishing and there is the risk of damage. **The Committee agreed that Mr Reid and the Finance Officer could use their good judgement to manage cash flow over the next twenty days.**

TR/LM

The Chairman explained to Ms Field that we have an under-spend in the budget for heathland management. He asked if we would be held accountable. Ms Field did not know. Mr Smith suggested that we cannot be held responsible if we have to reschedule the work around payments. The Finance Officer clarified that the expenditure due now (£85k+) is for work incurred in 2017 and would eventually be shown against the 2017 budget therefore reducing the under spend. Mr Galley proposed revisiting the financial issues in the Finance and General Purposes meeting on 12th March 2018. **The Committee agreed.**

Mr Smith asked the Conservation Officer if there was any work scheduled, but not legally contracted. The Conservation Officer explained that forest mulching work starts now and that all the winter work has been contracted out. The Conservation Officer explained contracts are agreed in advance and the next contracts are planned for June 2018 for bracken control. The Chairman reiterated that we should approach the Ashdown Forest Trust for a loan. Mr Cooper agreed. Ms Field clarified we should write to Jim Seymour at Natural England and that it is crucial we write a separate letter to Andrew Sells at Technical Services.

RS

04.2/18 Deer Programme budget

The Finance Officer invited questions on the Deer Programme budget. There were none.

05/18 Conservation Officer's Report

The Conservation Officer invited questions on the Conservation Officer's Report. There were none.

05.1/18 Grazing Officer's Report

The Chairman asked the Committee to defer the timeline for the consultation process needed to prepare a consultation paper regarding additional fencing. He proposed an urgent meeting with Footprint Ecology. **The Committee agreed.**

CF

The Committee entered confidential session

The Committee left confidential session

05.2/18 Management Team Meeting Report

The Conservation Officer discussed the practice of selling Christmas trees. He felt it was no longer viable to cut Scots Pine for sale as Christmas trees at the Visitor Centre, due to the remaining trees being widely dispersed on the Forest and of poor quality. The Rangers had found themselves under pressure in December to supply Christmas trees to local Churches and Parish Councils. Mr Cooper thought we should continue the tradition of providing trees for the Parishes. **The Conservation Officer agreed.**

SA/CF

The Conservation Officer discussed Bracken spraying over a two-year rolling programme. Sites will be revisited after three to four years.

JF(NE)

The Chairman discussed the coordination of roadside work with East Sussex County Council Highways. The Conservation Officer highlighted a surge in work by Highways, but occasionally they duplicate work already completed by our Countryside team. Mr Galley suggested revisiting our contacts at Highways to avoid any overlap.

05.3/18 Annual Report 2017

The Conservation Officer discussed the Annual Report highlighting a successful year, despite machinery breakdowns, staff absences and recruitment impacting our ability to carry out management work. The summer mowing, amenity work and autumn scrub clearance were all completed. Bob Kennedy was contracted as Volunteer Coordinator, which should allow us to greatly expand our volunteer effort and extend it to more areas of the Forest. Dan Graeme has been recruited on a full-time basis to cover management of the Forest's livestock. The North Chase Ranger Mike Yates retired at the end of 2017; he will be replaced by James Clow, with the other Rangers covering North Chase issues during the hand-over period.

The Chairman asked the Conservation Officer to add the common names on page 12 of his Annual Report for the annually monitored gentian and orchid species.

SA

The Conservation Officer gave a synopsis of the research meeting with academics from local universities (Sussex and Brighton), representatives of the Sussex Wildlife Trust and Centre for Ecology and Hydrology. He highlighted topics of interest covering rewilding, large mammals, deer grazing, remote sensing, thermal imaging, faecal studies, and the impact of nitrogen deposition. Unfortunately, there was minimal interest in heathland conservation techniques.

Cllr Tidy enquired about the budgetary impact of engaging contractors to cover long-term sickness. The Conservation Officer confirmed a contractor had been brought in for ten days using the Countryside Stewardship budget. **Cllr Tidy agreed to talk to the Finance Officer to ascertain the repercussions for the core budget.**

SA

05.4/18 Annual Plan 2018

Discussion about the Annual Plan was deferred to later in the meeting (07.1/18).

06/18 Compliance checklist and Monitoring (standing item)

06.1/18 Monitoring and evaluating the impact of management

The Conservation Officer confirmed there were no new management issues to monitor and evaluate.

06.2/18 CS compliance monitoring

The Conservation Officer confirmed that beyond major concerns over grazing compliance monitoring as noted in the above Minutes, there were no known additional issues.

06.3/18 Risk assessments and monitoring

Cllr Stogdon confirmed he had contacted Matthew Boyer for legal advice on the ADAS Risk Assessment but had not heard back. The Chairman asked Cllr Stogdon to follow up the call.

RS

07/18 Strategic Plan and Conservation Management Plan review (standing item)

07.1/18 Revised Conservation Management Plan after autumn season

The Conservation Officer discussed the continued transition in management from a focus on the heathland restoration work of scrub and invasive woodland clearance to improving the condition of Ashdown Forest heathlands through an expansion of grazing and cut and collect operations. The Committee discussed the methods and targets for managing invasive woodland and Gorse. The Chairman enquired about targets for functional bare ground. The Conservation Officer discussed positive results from areas that were pulsed grazed intensively. He also made observations about Heath Star-moss that breaks off in clumps providing a habitat for the germination of Heather

seedlings. Mr Francis enquired about material changes to the Plan. The Conservation Officer confirmed that the areas have changed, but the substance of the plan remains unchanged; with the exception of Invisible Fencing which has been included in the Plan with a zero budget.

Mr Francis enquired whether there is scope to allow the Sussex Pony Grazing and Conservation Trust (SPGCT) to graze this year. Mr Smith declared a personal interest at item 07.1/18; his wife is the Treasurer of the Sussex Pony Grazing and Conservation Trust (SPGCT). **The Conservation Officer agreed to review our grazing entitlement and amend the budget to include SPGCT.**

SA

07.2/18 Urgent action needed before next meeting – Working Group

The Chairman requested a meeting with Footprint Ecology before the Commoners meeting. (See 05.1/18)

07.3/18 Compartment Management Plans

The Chairman requested GIS maps of the compartments, showing proposed management, be made available at a future meeting.

SA

08/18 Management Information (standing item)

The Chairman complimented staff on the recent prosecution over a sheep worrying incident.

09/18 Any urgent items for which the Clerk has notice in order to pass to the Chairman

There were none

The meeting closed at 4:25pm