

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

**1430, Wednesday 17 June 2009
Lancaster Room, Ashdown Forest Centre**

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

NB. The Committee comprises four instead of the usual five Board members because the FGP Committee has not met since the County Council elections (4 June) and, therefore, has yet to elect a Chairman.

1) Vision for the Forest

Cllr Barnes introduced a draft of a vision for the Forest and suggested that it form the basis for further discussion.

Our vision of the Forest embraces it as a man-made landscape, which comprises the finest stretch of open heathland, dry, damp and wet in South East England with splendid views from its windswept slopes to the South Downs and to the greensand ridge to the north and a series of wooded ghylls and valleys; respectively they currently approximate to sixty and forty percent of the land in the care of the Conservators and to maintain that proportion. The heathland is to be restored to favourable condition with a view to maintaining biodiversity, but the woodland too needs to be managed.

There are rights of common to be maintained, but a need also to provide the visitor with a place of quiet recreation that can help recharge him spiritually and physically. It the duty of the Conservators to conserve the unique landscape they have inherited to maintain the balance between those who have a right to use the Forest and those who visit it for their own recreation.

We have also a duty to educate those who use and visit the Forest to ensure that they too play a part in its preservation and conservation.

After some scrutiny it was agreed that the draft was about the right length (it should certainly not be longer) and that words/phrases such as ‘tranquillity’, ‘wild’ (but not ‘wilderness’), ‘balance of conservation and recreation’ and ‘local community’ might usefully be included. It was also agreed that a one sentence ‘strapline’ (akin to the RSPB’s ‘For birds, for people, for ever’) should be created.

2) Annual Plan

It was agreed that this should be reintroduced and that the Clerk would produce one by 1 September, and that ‘unbureaucratic’ staff performance management be introduced. A list of Board decisions (updating an earlier document) should also be produced from Board minutes as well as a collation of all Board policies – by 1 October.

3) Re-definition of roles in the Office

It was agreed that the separation of the roles of Clerk and Superintendent was desirable in principle but that the full implications (e.g. cost consequences) need to be considered.

There was some discussion on the time taken to deal with finance – some 80% of the Office Manager's post alone. The rise is partly due to HLS. The Clerk undertook to do further investigations on the amount of time a professional book-keeper would spend on some of the tasks encompassed by the 80%, how much this might cost if contracted out, and the extent to which other tasks could be covered by an accountant. Other organisations of a similar budget were mentioned which have an 'overpaid' finance manager who, while doing book-keeping, can also (usefully) deal with interest rates, county councils etc. It was agreed that the Clerk would work with Mr Glyn and Mrs Fiona Temple to devise a splitting and reallocation of financial responsibilities. It was recognised that increasing specialisation is inevitable.

As an aside, it was noted that the recent demand by the Rural Payment Agency (RPA) for reimbursement of Single Farm Payments made to the Board from 2005/2006 should not go unchallenged. At the time the Conservation Officer told the RPA that they were mistaken in making these payments. (*Post meeting note:* The demand came via a telephone call to the Conservation Officer, not by letter as the Clerk had thought.) It was thought worthwhile approaching Natural England on the matter and also, in relation to the matter in the paragraph above, whether the 1.7x mark-up of staff costs on top of salary was appropriate.

4) The current Board and Committee system

The minutes of the 8 June Board meeting record, under 17.4/09, that "clarification on delegation to Committees was needed". This meeting proposed that a) the Clerk would draw up new terms of reference for the Committees, b) Committees should make all decisions on the implementation of existing policy on matters within their terms of reference, c) decisions only would be circulated to the Board as a whole (by email would be sufficient) and would stand unless they were challenged by at least 25% of Board members within a certain period, in which case the decisions would be called to the next Board meeting and d) otherwise only proposed changes of policy would need to be discussed at Board level, i.e. there would be no need to approve of Committee minutes.

There was some discussion about the frequency of Board and Committee meetings; collectively these take place every three weeks if most of August and the Christmas fortnight are excluded. The 1974 Act specifies only that there must be at least two of the former. There was broad agreement that, in the absence of need for decision-making, merely to make up an agenda with updates was not satisfactory and that any 'slack' could be devoted to site visits or seminars. It was agreed that a proposal should be made to the Board to consider introducing some flexibility into the scheduling of meetings and having them only as required as long as there was a sufficient gap (e.g. three weeks) before the following Board meeting.

5) Standing Orders

The terms of reference for the Executive Committee need to be drawn up to replace those in place for the Urgency Committee. It was agreed that the Committee should meet on an 'as and when' basis and that its only delegated power should be for matters of an urgent nature. It has a useful role as a sounding board for the Clerk, for discussing sensitive issues and keeping management under review.

It was agreed that a form of acceptance for non-councillor appointees should be drawn up, in which the appointees essentially undertake to comply with the same Model Code of Conduct as councillors. It would also be desirable that commoner-elected Conservators do likewise. To explore this idea, the chairman of the next General Meeting of the commoners could ask the floor if those they are about to elect to the Board, or have already elected, should sign. Clearly it would be most extraordinary if candidates or elected Conservators declined to do so. It was recognised that it was not just at meetings that the conduct of Conservators need be appropriate and that, while no Conservator has the power to act as an individual, he/she can give personal views (e.g. to the media) as long as this is made clear.

There was agreement that the Standing Orders also need tightening up in the event of a Conservator being in breach of them. It was proposed that the mechanism for dealing with this was for the Clerk to be asked to convene a hearing comprising at least three 'back bench' members of the Board.

6) Committee membership

It was recognised that those invited to be advisers to Committees reflect their organisational interest and expertise in the Forest and are distinct from co-optees who are invited by virtue of their own individual expertise.

The Chairman asked the Clerk to invite Cllr Michael Hoy to join the FGP Committee.

The meeting closed at ca 1715.