

Minutes of the
ASHDOWN FOREST
FINANCE AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE MEETING

1430, Monday 21 February 2005

Ashdown Forest Centre

Present: Mr R. Parsons (Chairman), Mr M. Cooper, Mr P Glyn, Dr H. Prendergast (Clerk), Mr F. Whetstone, Mr A. White

Also present: Mrs J. Wirdnam

Apologies: Mr A. Reid

1) Staff job evaluations and salary structure

The Committee agreed to go into Confidential Session for this item (see end paper).

1545. The Confidential Session ended.

2) Byelaw contraventions

Dr Prendergast reported that boundary walking by the Rangers is revealing an alarming number of bye-law breaches. He has sent details of breaches pertaining one property to the County Solicitor in order to assess the merit of taking the owners to court. He will also be writing a letter to all Commoners and Forest residents about the importance of compliance with bye-laws.

3) Non-payment by Commoners and rate payers – i) 2003-2004 + 2004-2005 and ii) + 2004-2005 only

i) Dr Prendergast reported that in 2004 the County Solicitor sent letters to about 40 people who were two years in arrears for their payments. By today all but nine, eight of whom are Commoners, had paid; their debts total £509.24. Two of the nine consistently refuse to pay; their debts total £145.81. He sought the Committee's advice on whether to start proceedings against them.

The Committee recommended this course of action through the County Solicitor.

ii) Dr Prendergast reported that those who have yet to pay the 2004/2005 rate number 37, of whom 30 are Commoners; their debts total £891.00.

4) Update

a) End of year accounts. These were presented. Dr Prendergast said that significant grants from ESCC, WDC and Defra have yet to be received and payments have yet to be made to all contractors working on the Forest. For 2005-2006, the level of funding from Defra for the new Higher Level Scheme will not be made public until 3 March. He also handed out a summary of information about grants from the Forestry Commission that will increase income by a total of £116,000 over the next five years.

Mr Parsons offered to follow up with WDC about their grant.

b) Direct debiting. Mrs Marriott is making good progress with this, but the amount of work required is much more than anticipated.

c) Forest Centre development. Dr Prendergast reported that the RPA Committee had formally endorsed working with the High Weald Unit on a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) in September that will include the development of the Centre. The need to present a business plan for the Centre's future to HLF ties in with the need for one anyway, as had previously been suggested by several members of the Board. Dr Prendergast already has an outline for what a business plan should contain, especially with HLF in mind. He wondered whether FGP would recommend asking the costs of developing such a plan to be covered by the Ashdown Forest Conservation Trust (meeting in March 2005). Mr White wondered at the Conservation Trust's remit and Mr Whetstone suggested the Ashdown Forest Trust; this is not spending the full complement of its annual income.

The Committee thought that the business plan might have to be done by a commercial consultant, and include architectural drawings. Dr Prendergast said he would seek clarification about the latter.

d) Standing Orders. Dr Prendergast reminded the Committee that the District Auditor advised the modernisation of these Orders some years ago. He has produced a draft. The Committee deputed Mr Glyn to work with Dr Prendergast.

e) Broadband. The Centre is now on Broadband. The next step is to network all the PCs, some of which will need updating.

f) Lease of Royal Ashdown Forest Golf Club. Dr Prendergast has learned that ESCC is drafting a new 99 year lease for the golf courses. Considering that the Board is the third party involved, and had not yet been contacted, he had obtained a draft and asked Forest staff to meet Golf Club staff to review the boundaries of the lease.

g) Staffing. After discussions with Hugh Mackenzie, Dr Prendergast is upgrading the former's post to that of Caretaker (rather than Office Cleaner) to do more work round the Centre, relieving the need for other staff to do it and making more use of Mr Mackenzie's considerable expertise in this line.

The Committee endorsed Mr Parsons' suggestion of introducing time-sheets along with the new pay structures. Mr Cooper emphasised that information so obtained should be useful and will be of more value as time goes on and comparisons become clear. Dr Prendergast said that time-sheets would also help to answer questions posed by Mr White (before the meeting) about the allocation of staff costs to the three headings of the accounts (Amenity and Community, Conservation and Finance and Support).

5) Urgent item

Access to properties. Mr Parsons said that after the last RPA Committee meeting he became concerned about the size of accesses across Forest land. Only a small proportion of accesses abides with Board policies and, perhaps, with matters of health and safety on the roads. He was concerned that the Board may stand on 'dubious' ground about restricting the size of new accesses. Mr Glyn said the Board cannot legislate retrospectively, only to new accesses and that the Board can change its position. Mr Whetstone suggested that accesses should be proportionate to the size/number of properties affected and that the Committee needs to adopt a robust policy that is publicly defensible. A "one size fits all" policy is not tenable.

Re. Cats Protection Mr Cooper said that the issue needs resolution before it becomes a press issue.

Mr White asked that, following the agreement on a parking protocol on Forest land (see the minutes of the RPA Committee meeting of 6 October 2004), charging for parking be discussed at a future meeting.

The meeting finished at 1715.

**FGP COMMITTEE
CONFIDENTIAL SESSION
21 February 2005**

Staff job evaluations and salary structure

Dr Prendergast said that he started the process of reviewing staff salaries, and contracting the right people to carry it through, in May 2004. Since then Mrs Sheena Bridger, ESCC Personnel Officer, and Mrs Sue Hammond, an adviser to the South Downs Conservation Board, have evaluated all staff posts, via interviews and forms (which had been agreed and signed by staff), to assess whether they are fair and, on this basis, made the recommendations made today.

Mr Parsons said that he and Mr Glyn had met the consultants separately from Dr Prendergast. He reminded the Committee that the Board, during his Chairmanship, had recommended a review of staff salaries. He thanked Dr Prendergast for his initiative and integrity in this review. The National Job Evaluation Scheme, used for about half of ESCC posts, was the basis of the consultants' review.

He and Mr Glyn had seen a full report and, with the consultants, provided a summary of it to the Committee. The Office Cleaner's post has been over-paid. The salaries of other lower paid staff (the Countryside Workers, Head Tractor Driver) are below those for these types of posts in the public sector whereas those Rangers, Conservation Officer and Office Manager are at the level of the market. Some posts are spot salaries (e.g. that of Head Tractor Driver) while others are on narrow incremental pay scales (e.g. those of the Rangers).

The implementation of the new salaries under discussion will be a recurrent additional 3% of the salary bill, in addition to any annual review increase of the same order. [NB Any review of the Superintendent's salary or conditions would continue to be a matter dealt with by the Board Chairman in association with the Chairman of FGP.]

The consultants suggested the adoption of the salary structure presented and, after discussion with Mr Glyn and Mr Parsons, the retention of the additional allowance, of £246.00, for Rangers and the Conservation Officer for their vehicles. This allowance compensates them for the fact that they receive a taxable benefit. It was also recommended that the special payment for out-of-hours work is to be kept apart from the salaries, i.e. not consolidated.

Mr Cooper made the point that expectations of staff may have been raised by this review. Dr Prendergast said that he had emphasised throughout that the whole point was not to raise salaries but to assess whether they are fair within the county. It was agreed that staff titles would continue to be the decision of the Clerk.

The Committee endorsed the recommendations of the consultants, in brief therefore that all staff posts should be assimilated to the new scales. More work needs doing with the consultants on how to implement the new scales.

1545. The Confidential Session ended.