

Minutes of the

FINANCE AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST

1430, Monday 19 February 2007

Education Barn, Ashdown Forest Centre

Minutes

Present: Cllr R. Parsons (Chairman), Cllr J. Barnes, Mr M. Cooper, Mr P. Glyn, Dr H. Prendergast (Clerk), Cllr A. Reid, Mr R. Thornely-Taylor, Cllr F. Whetstone. Minutes taken by Mrs R. Marriott.

Also present: Mr J. Spicer.

Mr Parsons drew the Committee's attention to the layout of the meeting. He hoped that it would improve visibility and audibility in the room. There were no members of the public present for the question time at the start of the meeting.

1) Apologies

Cllr R. Stogdon

2) Declarations of interest by Members of a personal or prejudicial nature

Mr Thornely-Taylor declared that he was related to Mrs Fiona Temple (financial adviser).

3) Finance items

(i) ESCC, WDC and Ashdown Forest Trust grant position for 2007-2008. Cllr Reid confirmed that the combined grant from ESCC (84,000) and the Ashdown Forest Trust grant (£65,100) would be reduced by £5,300 to £149,900 for 2007-2008. The ESCC contribution will remain at £84,800 over the next three years. The AFT grant, increased to £55,100, and an additional £10,000 which would be available for discretionary projects for each of the next three years. There is a possibility that the AFT in future may be able to redress the shortfall but the Board should be aware that the ESCC is very restricted by its own budget. Dr Prendergast confirmed that, as the owner of a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), ESCC had a duty to ensure that ca. £45,000 be spent on lowland heath maintenance. This cost had only been identified since the introduction of HLS; previously, the Countryside Stewardship Scheme grants had had an element for maintenance. Cllr Whetstone thought this money should come from the AFT. It was suggested that the County Solicitor be made aware of the position and it was agreed that a letter should be sent to ESCC formally identifying the £45,000 and link it to the receipt of the grants. Dr Prendergast asked for clarification as to whether the Board should be seeking alternative sources of funds for its activities. This was confirmed. Cllr Barnes commented that the situation reinforced the importance of the ESCC Cabinet having sight of the Annual Report.

(ii) Audit of accounts for 2004/5 and 2005/6. Mrs Fiona Temple was helping with the production of the accounts in the new revised format.

- (iii) Revised budget(s) for 2006/7 and 2007/8. Dr Prendergast explained how HLS funds would enable the release of funds currently from the General Fund balance to be spent on other projects. Cllr Barnes stated that the Board would be well advised to keep the budgets for HLS and the general running of the Forest separate as HLS income was time-limited; two separate budgets should be presented to ESCC Cabinet. It was agreed that the revision of the budget would be work in progress.
- (iv) Current cash flow forecast and financial statement. Dr Prendergast explained that the cashflow statement showed no differentiation between the HLS budget and the base budget. It was agreed that this should continue to be available each month. The Financial Statement attempted to show the relationship between the HLS budget and the traditional budget. Natural England (NE) has made use of a basic formula for calculating manpower costs which employs a multiplier of 1.7 times salary. It was agreed that future financial statements should show real salary costs, costs relating to the £45,000 maintenance budget and any other aspects following specific discussions with NE.

4) Higher Level Scheme (HLS)

- (i) Update on current position. Dr Prendergast reported that Chris Marrable, Conservation Officer, was working with NE on the conservation objectives. The Action Plan Pro-forma for Conservation was presented to the Conservation Committee at its last meeting. Chris Marrable had been developing the job description for a “stock manager” who will be able to engage with the local community to increase the understanding of the Board’s objectives. The position is now advertised with a closing date of the end of this month; if the position is not filled, he would investigate other options. He had reported that there had been nationwide interest in the project from other organisations.

The Panel overseeing HLS on Ashdown Forest had had its first meeting at the end of January. Members of the Panel are Dr Alex Tait (County Ecologist), Jason Lavender (Co-director of the High Weald Unit) and Jim Smith (NE). The Panel wishes to appoint a heathland specialist. Meetings of the Panel were not open to the public but it is hoped to keep the public informed through the web site and the newsletter, *Ashdown Forest Life*.

Mr Barnes predicted a tightening of budgeting control with the HLS in 2008/09; this was another argument for keeping separate core and project budgets. Cllr Parsons said that this was a most important reason for appointing a financial adviser to the Board.

- (ii) Implications for resources. As new projects are identified, the costs would have to be calculated. The close-shepherding project was the first significant example. The capital cost of replacement vehicles and machinery had been estimated at £50,000. This included the cost of a new tractor (including part-exchange value), mowers and an auger. Since the Friends of Ashdown Forest had funded the purchase of vehicles in the past, concern was expressed that the Friends should not feel that they have been sidelined. It was agreed that Dr Prendergast should liaise with the Friends to identify other projects that the Friends could support.

5) Improving public involvement

- (i) Stakeholder engagement (3KQ) – Update Dr Prendergast stated that the report of the Stakeholder meeting held on 13 January was on the web site. All Conservators should have been sent a copy by 3KQ. There were two more Stakeholder meetings planned for June and September and also interest group meetings. It is anticipated that the outline Forest Plan will be ready by November.
- (ii) Working with local parish councils Two Parish Councils had shown particular interest in opening a dialogue with the Board. It was suggested that there should be three or four meetings a year with the Chairman or their representative. Mr Glyn complimented the Councillors who had liaised consistently with their Parish Councils. **The Committee recommends that the Board invite representatives from each local Parish Council or Town Council to attend regular scheduled meetings at which there can be an exchange of views and concerns.**
- (iii) Communications. Dr Prendergast reported that the next issue of *Ashdown Forest Life* would be part funded by HLS. He was aware that the new web site needed regular maintenance and he was looking into ways of doing this.

Several Committee members had been questioned about the removal of the deer warning signs from the roadsides at the principle entrances to the Forest. Cllr Barnes suggested that one or two high profile signs which tally the number of deer killed should be erected. Dr Prendergast reported that the Ashdown Area Deer Group had been looking at a number of proposals. Cllr Reid agreed to speak to the Highways Department to confirm that ESCC had agreed to erect new deer warning signs at the main black spots and to facilitate their urgent funding in view of the public anxiety on the matter.

6) Standing Orders

- (i) Update. Dr Prendergast said that the Board's Standing Orders dated back to 1975. He presented a draft revision. Cllr Parsons suggested that a working party should study the draft and report back. Cllr Barnes, Mr Glyn and Mr Cooper put their names forward. Cllr Reid agreed to ask the Council's legal department for advice.
- (ii) Arrangements for public questions in Board and Committee meetings. Cllr Parsons said that he would put his comments regarding public involvement to the working party.

7) Action Plan 2007/2008 - Finance and Resources

Dr Prendergast presented the *Action Plan* outlining the work he proposes to focus on during the next financial year. Mr Cooper commented on how useful the *Plan* was. Cllr Parsons felt that, although public involvement was a matter for the Board to ensure, it could be included in the *Action Plan* under this section. The three *Action Plans* presented at each of the Committees are to be compiled into a single document and tabled with a front sheet for the Board meeting on 12 March 2007.

Mr Glyn formally thanked Cllr Parsons for his first class Chairmanship over the years and commented that his financial prudence had been invaluable to the Board.

The meeting closed at 1715.