

## Minutes of the

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

1430, Monday 16 February 2009  
Education Barn, Ashdown Forest Centre

Present: Mr R Thornely-Taylor (Chairman), Mr R Parsons (co-opted), Dr H Prendergast (Clerk), Cllr T Reid, Cllr R Stogdon and Cllr F Whetstone. Minutes were taken by Mrs T Buxton.

Also present: Cllr J Barnes (*ex-officio*) and Mr M Cooper.

The Chairman opened the meeting. There were no members of the public present.

#### **1/09 Apologies.**

Apologies had been received from Cllr R Galley, Mr P Glyn, Mr L Gillham, Cllr B Lacey, Mr J Spicer.

#### **2/09 Declarations of Interest by Members of a Personal or Prejudicial Nature.**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **3/09 Financial Report (year to date) – FGP 1.**

There was a discussion regarding the financial information that had been pre-circulated to the Committee. The Chairman commented that the contributions from ESCC and Ashdown Forest Trust had only just been confirmed. It was noted that HLS income and expenditure have to be in balance, showing neither surplus nor loss.

Cllr Whetstone asked to see the letter from ESCC and commented that the delay between the decision being made and the correspondence reaching the Clerk was unacceptable and deserved an apology.

The Chairman stated that there was still no indication of the size of the grant from WDC. Mr Parsons said that it was on the WDC agenda for discussion in a few days. Cllr Barnes said that the formal letter from WDC, regarding the grant, would probably arrive in March and, until a figure was confirmed, it should be shown in the accounts in square brackets. The Chairmen said, should WDC fail to make a grant, steps should be immediately taken to reduce expenditure and potential areas had previously been identified, i.e. car park maintenance, bridge work and ride repairs. He went on to say any adjustments should be discussed fully with himself and the Board Chairman.

Cllr Barnes noted that the Board had the right to approach other funding sources and there was a short discussion regarding approaching the Parish Councils for funding for specific work.

There was a short discussion regarding transport and machinery costs and it was noted that increased fuel costs were included in the figure along with general maintenance and running costs for the vehicles.

The Clerk stated that the figure shown for litter disposal in 2009/2010 remained precautionary and there followed a short discussion regarding the process for dealing with and prosecuting fly-tippers including how the Forest could be perceived in law as 'public' because it is owned via ESCC or as 'private' because it is held via the Ashdown Forest Trust. The clearance of fly-tipping from public places is the responsibility of the district councils. The Chairman suggested that the question be put to WDC for clarification of their position.

The Chairman noted that the accounts for 2009/10 would be recommended to the Board at the next meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2009 and would show the estimates from ESCC, anticipate the WDC

contribution and highlight the contingency plans. He went on to say the budget, when completed, would be sent to ESCC as a formality.

There was a short discussion regarding heathland as an SSSI, European directives and who has the ultimate responsibility for maintenance. The Chairman stated that it had always been considered that ESCC, through the Ashdown Forest Trust as landlord, responsible for obligations arising from the Forest's designations (e.g. as a SSSI), however, that assumption is overridden by the Ashdown Forest Act in which the Board of Conservators indemnifies the Lord of the Manor against any liabilities of that nature. ESCC does, nevertheless have a responsibility to meet any approved financial deficit of the Board.

The cash projection was briefly discussed and it was recalled that a balance of six-month salaries was held in reserve. It was noted that the funds for July were low and that care should be taken in the timing of any expenditure. The Chairman went on to say it was important to resist the temptation of delaying payments so that no financial damage is caused to small traders.

There was a long discussion regarding bank interest rates on deposits that the Board hold. It was noted that investment interest rates had dropped sharply. Cllr Barnes suggested that the Board ought to look at holding more monies in the current account. The Chairman remarked that the financial situation had changed dramatically since the meeting with Mo Hemsley and that it was appropriate to regularly review the Board's investments and policies, continually take professional advice and request updates from Mo Hemsley to minimise any risks. Cllr Barnes commented that he was aware that ESCC held money in short-term overnight investments and that it could be worth considering corporate bonds. Cllr Reid commented that ESCC review their financial situation on a daily basis and that he was happy to take this discussion forward with ESCC.

**It was agreed that the Clerk write to WDC to ascertain the status of the Forest (as discussed above) in relation to prosecution of fly-tippers.**

**It was agreed that the WDC grant would be shown in square brackets until a decision on the level of funding had been made.**

**Cllr Reid agreed to discuss, in the light of the above discussion, the Board's current investments and protection of such investments with ESCC.**

**It was agreed that the budget, taking into account the Board estimates as agreed by ESCC and the WDC grant as described above, be recommended to the Board.**

#### **4/09 Proposal to introduce performance management**

The Clerk reported that the outstanding gap in the formalisation of the Board's planning structure was the absence of any 'performance management' in place for Forest staff and as there was now a strategic Forest Plan, an annual plan and all staff had job descriptions some form of annual appraisal or review was the next logical step. He went on to say 'performance management' would give a link from individual job descriptions to corporate plans, aid forward planning and illustrate how the team are contributing to the success of that plan. He went on to say performance would not be linked to pay as he felt it was not appropriate in this organisation but it would give staff an opportunity to discuss progress, training needs and provide targets in the year.

Cllr Stogdon commented that he found it difficult to see how it would work if staff were not rewarded for positive outcomes and asked the Clerk how he envisages it working.

Mr Cooper stated that he agreed with the Clerk that 'performance management' did not necessarily require a financial element. He continued by stating it was, in his opinion, a valuable management

tool that seemed to be elementary. He also said that there should be regular contact between managers and staff rather than a single contact and that such meetings should contain no surprises.

Mr Parsons said that 'performance management' could be interpreted in any number of ways. It placed a huge demand on managers and had financial implications in that the budget had to be able to cope with any adjustments. It was also important to stress that staff would not suffer any pay cuts. He went on to say that staff would need explanations on how they were to be measured, what targets they had to meet, what help would be given to them to achieve those targets and what sanctions would be made if they failed (including additional training and reviewing the actual targets). He continued by saying that there needed to be some core human relations and a great deal of sensitivity and that if there was not enthusiasm for the scheme it could be an uphill battle that could cause a great deal of disquiet.

There followed a long discussion on the pros and cons of 'performance management' and it was noted that Ranger's jobs were all slightly different due to their varying areas of expertise.

Cllr Stogdon stated that he would like to see a detailed paper from the Clerk, including the costs and expected outcomes, so the Committee could look at the issue fully.

The Clerk replied that he was unable to give any detail at the moment and that he was taking advice on how to take 'performance management' forward. There were currently five staff managing other staff who would be able to undertake the reviews and a further benefit would be to show the public how the staff spend their time. He went on to say that staff knowing they were doing a good job would be a reward in itself.

Cllr Whetstone commented that, due to the low numbers, staff would spend all their time 'performance managing' each other and he was concerned a huge structure was being built for a small organisation. He asked to see a flow chart of the staffing structure.

Mr Cooper said that 'performance management' was something elementary and it was important to see how people were getting along by setting objectives. He went on to say 'performance management' was the wrong term to use and it should be avoided. Cllr Barnes said he was concerned that the whole process could become bureaucratic and overload the system but he agreed that a sensitive annual discussion to tease out what the staff member needed in the way of support and what had been achieved was a good one if it was kept simple. He went on to say it helped staff move from one grade to the next and helped managers write references. He also commented that the organisation was a 'flat' one where staff had a degree of discretion and where priorities frequently change and he agreed that a paper on the issue would be helpful.

**It was agreed that the Clerk should prepare a detailed proposal including job descriptions and the staffing structure.**

**5/09 Proposal to amend Tendering for Contracts in the Financial Regulations – FGP 2.**

After a very short discussion this wording was agreed and the amendment should be made.

**It was agreed that the wording as shown in FGP 2 be adopted.**

**6/09 Any Urgent Item of which the Clerk has notice in order to pass to the elected Chairman**

The Chairman noted that he would be unable to attend an afternoon meeting on May 18<sup>th</sup> and it was agreed that the meeting would commence at 09.30am.

*The meeting closed at 16.45*