

Minutes of the
ASHDOWN FOREST
FINANCE AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE MEETING

1430, Monday 13 June 2005

Ashdown Forest Centre

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

Apologies: Mr A. Reid

Also present: Mr L. Gillham, Mr F. Marshall, Mrs J. Wirdnam

1) Election of Committee Chairman

Mr Glyn proposed that Mr Parsons be re-elected as Committee Chairman. Mr White seconded the proposal. Mr Parsons accepted the nomination.

2) Consider the Board's unaudited accounts for 2004/2005

Mr Parsons asked Dr Prendergast to present the accounts. There was an excess of income over expenditure for the year of £8,882. At year's end there were £136,935 of debts outstanding, including major ones from ESCC, WDC, and the Ashdown Forest Trust; the latter has still not been settled.

Income remained at the same overall level as in 2003/2004. On expenditure, noteworthy items include the £10,668 paid for the missing digger (under Miscellaneous), the increase in building insurance (from £6,873 to £13,022), the £15,158 spent on monitoring (most of which was subsidised) and the increase for conservation (from £31,284 to £52,041).

After discussion following comments from Mr Whetstone, it was agreed that on p. 3 (the summarised Income and Expenditure Account) the ESCC contribution should include the Ashdown Forest contribution and that on p. 6 (the Expanded Income and Expenditure Account) the Trust income should come under the heading of Local Authority.

On the question of the style of the accounts, Mr Cooper suggested that the 'old' one (as used here) be retained for the Board meeting, and that the 'new' style (based on the cost codings developed during 2003/2004, and the headings of the *Action Plan* – viz Finance & Support, Conservation and Amenity & Community) be presented at the next FGP Committee meeting.

Mr Parsons thanked Mrs Marriot and Dr Prendergast for the presentation of the accounts.

3) Staffing

Dr Prendergast reported that William Wallis tendered his resignation as Countryside Worker to take effect from the end of May. The vacancy has been advertised in the local press, via an internet employment agency and on the Forest website. The closing date for applications is 24 June.

The state of the contract with Mr Mackenzie is still unresolved. The staff pay review found that he was being paid well over the rate for the type of post he has. Dr Prendergast would like Mr Mackenzie to extend his role from cleaner to caretaker and is hoping to have discussions later this week.

Mr Parsons mentioned the help of ESCC officers in the pay review and the interest that Mr Slack had shown in this area. He supported the possibility of expanding the role of Mr Mackenzie and of recruiting staff who may have some chance of career progression. He welcomed the logical pattern and background that the pay review had put in place.

3) Clerk's update

i) Riding permits. Mr Parsons distributed a letter from Mr John Spicer regarding the discontinuation of the summer permit and the discount for Commoners. Mr Gillham had also received letters and his idea of the Committee revisiting the issue at its next meeting was approved. It was also agreed that the figures regarding the benefits of both AFRA and Commoner discounts be reanalysed, there being some concern about ambiguity in the minutes of the November 2004 meeting. Mr Parsons said he would respond to Mr Spicer about the Committee's plan. Mr Marshall reminded the Committee that Mrs D. Bagshawe had considered the riding permit fees "ridiculously cheap".

ii) Other accesses

Mr Parsons said that there was great variation in accesses over the Forest in terms of usage, width, surface material etc. and that new issues keep arising – as at Old Forge Lane and on the A275. The Board has long attempted to acquire land for the Forest so its reaction to the proposed development at Old Forge Lane, for example, was to consider the offer of land as the benefit. He emphasised how important it was that the Board develops a common approach to all accesses in terms of income and control.

iii) Cats Protection (CP)

A letter dated 10 June 2005 had been sent to Mr Glyn and Dr Prendergast in response to two letters from the former dated 23 and 27 May. Mr Parsons said that the Urgency Committee had been dealing with the CP access issue and that the CP development was probably the largest on the Forest for a very long time; whatever happened there should fit with any new principles that are developed.

Mr Glyn summarised the recommendations of Mr Tim Raikes, namely that the improved access, the current one being sub-standard, will increase the capital value of the CP site by at least £1 million. NB: The exact wording of Mr Raikes's proposal is as follows: *As the new rateable value has not been assessed by the District Valuer, it is proposed that the fee should equate to an annual rent to be determined from assessing the capital sum that would normally be payable in these circumstances, being a proportion of the increase in the capital value of your property, as a result of the improved access....When, in due course, a rateable value has been set, the licence fee can then be expressed as a fixed percentage of the rateable value.*

The alternative to the proposed access is for CP to buy another site by the A275 and create a new access via there.

Mr Glyn said that his letter of 27 May to CP had mentioned the scheme proposed by Mr Raikes and that he had asked the surveyor acting for CP to contact Mr Raikes. Mr Raikes has reported (10 June) that he had had “unsatisfactory telephone conversations” with the CP surveyor who had refused to accept that the current access onto the A275 is sub-standard. In this case, Mr Raikes had suggested that another surveyor might be used to act as an expert in order to come up with the figures required to enable a licence to be completed.

Mr Gillham observed that it was because of CP’s rejection of an acceptable land donation – notwithstanding CP’s Supporting Statement for the site development to WDC mentioning a significant area of land being passed to the Board - that the Board had set off on its current approach to settling the access issue.

Mr Cooper suggested that, in case of an impasse, a third party might be appointed by both parties as an arbitrator to make a judgement and that the Board’s best course of action would be to emphasise that it is now acting upon professional advice and that it is considering an approach that might be applied to all accesses, not just the CP one. He furthermore recommended that a press release be prepared for the Board meeting next week and that Dr Prendergast contact the Charity Commission to get an idea of the scale of CP’s resources. The Committee supported these suggestions.

Mr Glyn said that his response to the 10 June letter to CP would be to say that a) the access across Forest land from the A275 has been discussed at this meeting today; b) it will also be discussed at the Board meeting next week; c) consideration is also being given to other accesses across Forest land; and d) advisers could start talking. The Committee agreed that the Board meeting should focus on the process of resolving the issue and that all discussions be held in open session. The Urgency Committee will continue to liaise with Mr Raikes.

4) Any other business

Dr Prendergast mentioned that the new computer network is now in place and functioning.

Mr Marshall asked about progress on the barn at Whitehouse Farm. Dr Prendergast said that he understood that 50% funding would come from either DEFRA or English Nature. The other 50% could come from the High Priority provision made in the 2003/2004 accounts.

The meeting finished at 1655.