

**Minutes of the**  
**ASHDOWN FOREST**  
**FINANCE AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE MEETING**

1430, Monday 7 November 2005

Ashdown Forest Centre

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

Apologies        Mr R. Parsons, Mr A. Reid

Also present     Mr J. Barnes, Mr F. Marshall, Mrs J. Wirdnam

**1) Financial implications of the purchase of Whitehouse Farm**

Last Friday the deeds arrived at the Centre and were checked by a solicitor acting on the Board's behalf. Construction of the barn can now go ahead. The full cost for it, including the infrastructure (e.g. track, concrete base, drainage), is £75,220 + VAT. English Nature's support has been confirmed at £8,923/ year for three years.

The Committee agreed that payment could of up £50k could come from the High Priority Fund, leaving any other funds that needed to be raised from the Reserves. The Committee expressed an interest in approaching the Friends if there was a need, not least since the deal involves the acquisition of land.

**2) Staffing matters – arrivals and departures; salary; management structure**

Dr Prendergast reported that Dave King tendered his resignation and his Ranger post has been offered, after advertising and interview, to Rich Allum who has been working as project officer for the Weald Heathland Initiative for the last five years. He will start later this month.

With advice from Sheena Bridger, ESCC, and after contact with his union representative, Hugh Mackenzie has been made redundant with effect from January 2006. Ever since the start of his employment on the Forest in 1990, he has never had a contract and both his job description and working hours were unwritten. The pay review last year determined that he was overpaid for the scale of the job and discussions with him about increasing his hours and responsibilities were unsuccessful. Recruitment is already underway for an expanded post of Cleaner/Caretaker, 0.3 FTE, and also for a 1 day/week Litter Warden.

Dr Prendergast reported that, after ideas received from, and in consultation with, the Rangers, he has formally appointed Mr R. Beal as the Line Manager for the Countryside team, Mr C. Lutman, Mr M. Payne and Mr I. Playford. Mr Beal, as a Ranger, is effectively a manager anyway on a day-to-day basis. Formalising this position clarifies lines of responsibility. He asked the Committee's view about a rise in salary for Mr Beal to recognise the rise in responsibility and, on being asked his own view, suggested two

scale points to which the Committee agreed. Mr Cooper said that in normal circumstances it was a very unsound practice, leading to neglecting one's own priorities, for anyone to have more than five or six staff reporting directly to them; he therefore welcomed the move. Mr Barnes wondered at going back to ESCC when Mr Beal reaches the top of the pay scale for his post.

Dr Prendergast reported that the Ashdown Forest Trust (whose trustees are the Cabinet of ESCC) had yet to consider the application for funding he submitted in September for a part-time, three year Bye-law Enforcement Officer post.

### **3) 2005/2006 half-year figures; 2006/2007 estimates**

The revised estimates were presented, along with notes explaining changes since the first estimates.

As well as drawing attention to the notes attached to the estimates, Dr Prendergast explained that the increase of £5,000 income from English Nature in 2005/2006 is due to a grant for an extension of last year's invertebrate survey; and that the new income from the Forestry Commission, £26,221 for 2005/2006, is the result of a successful application to the Woodland Grant Scheme for ride maintenance and Rhododendron clearance. After some discussion about the High Weald Interpretation project, to which the Forest will contribute £7,500 in 2005/2006 and £15,000 in 2006/2007 but get back a greater amount in kind, it was agreed that the 'in kind' should not appear as income but be referred to in a note.

On the suggestion of Mr Whetstone, and partially because of the strong seasonality of the Forest's income and expenditure, the Committee agreed that six month as well as annual estimates should be done for the following year. It was also agreed that a comparison (profile) for the last six months of 2005/2006 should be done against a similar period for 2004/2005.

After Dr Prendergast had explained the current uncertainty of when the Defra Higher Level Scheme will start, eventually to bring £300,000/year, Mr Whetstone said ESCC is unlikely to pay its current level of contribution since its statutory duty is merely to 'top up' the Board's income. He added that there is a "general feeling" that the Forest employs "overqualified Rangers" and that a lot of money is being spent on the Forest. Mr Cooper said he had never heard such an expression after 34 years of living near the Forest and Dr Prendergast said that such sentiments were far, for example, from what emerged at a meeting the previous week with local parish councils. He said that Defra is unlikely to be happy with a situation where it might be perceived as paying for salaries of Forest staff rather than for meeting agreed conservation objectives.

Mr Glyn said that it is important that it is clear on what Defra income will be spent. Mr Barnes emphasised that the Trustees of the Ashdown Forest Trust have certain duties that differ from those of the Cabinet and added that any income stream that comes without obligations is bound to raise questions. Mr Marshall said that times have changed, that the Board has ever more work to do and that the costs of management are far higher than before.

After discussion that covered commoners' rates, permit fees for riding (including for commoners) and riding stables, **the Committee agreed to a proposal from Mr Barnes**

**to recommend that the Board adopt a policy that all fees relating to activities on the Forest should be raised annually by the rate of inflation to the nearest full number.** Any exception would need separate discussion.

The Committee also agreed to Mr Barnes' suggestion that project budgets should be made separate from the standard budget. He offered to get samples of such a system from accounts elsewhere.

The Committee suggested other changes to the presentation of the accounts, such as separating vehicle purchase from running costs and, in answer to a question from Dr Prendergast, recommended asking the Conservators of Malvern Hills which insurance company they used. There was agreement that "testing the water" with other companies every five years or so was a good practice.

Lastly, Dr Prendergast said that Mr C. Marrable had been approached by the University of Sussex about the Forest contributing £2,000/year for three years to a PhD (*Creating within-habitat heterogeneity: managing heathlands for invertebrate diversity*) that it is submitting to NERC for funding. The topic is of huge interest for the conservation of the Forest and Dr Prendergast asked the Committee if they supported the costs of support. After discussion, the Committee agreed to a proposal from Mr Barnes that the Board should pay but would seek an offsetting grant from the Society of Friends of Ashdown Forest. The last payment should not be made until the PhD is complete and its results presented to the Board.

#### **4) Bye-law contraventions**

Dr Prendergast reported that since the Court Undertaking of 22 September by the owners of Old Fox House, Duddleswell not to park on the Forest, evidence had been obtained that the practice continued, along with the dumping of spoil. The County Solicitor was informed and a warning letter was sent by him to the owners.

#### **5) AOB**

Mr White asked that a list of dates for Board and Committee meetings in 2006/2007 be presented at the Board meeting on 14 November.

The meeting ended at 1710.