

## Minutes of the

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

1430, Monday 5 November 2007  
Education Barn, Ashdown Forest Centre

Present: Mr R Thornely-Taylor (Chairman), Cllr J Barnes, Mr M Cooper, Mr P Glyn, Cllr A Reid, Cllr R Stogdon and Cllr F Whetstone. Dr H Prendergast (Clerk)

Also present: Mr L Gillham, Cllr M Hoy, Mr C Marrable, and Mrs F Temple, accountant. Minutes were taken by Mrs R Marriott.

The Chairman opened the meeting and welcomed the members of the public present. He invited questions. Mrs Anne Haig-McVitty asked if the Committee felt the expense of the stakeholder consultation exercise was justified. Mr Thornely-Taylor stated that the matter was part of the agenda.

#### 1. Apologies

Apologies had been received from Mr R Parsons and Mr J Spicer. Mr A Reid who had advised that he would be late.

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

No declarations were made other than Mr Thornely-Taylor stating that Mrs Temple was seconded from his own office and was a family member.

#### 3. Finance items

*Papers relating to the Finance items will be published after acceptance by the Board at its meeting on 19 November 2007.*

##### 3.i 2007/2008 half-year figures: 2008/2009 estimates.

After careful perusal of the revised estimates, it was agreed that alternatives to the purchase of a chipper should be considered by the Conservation Committee and that ways of reducing the high cost of stakeholder engagement should be explored. Mr Marrable expressed his concern that the HLS panel would query the proposed reduction in expenditure but it was agreed that the HLS administration expenses were not fully taken into account and would need to be reviewed. Mr Cooper asked why a chipper was so important. Mr Marrable replied that it was to avoid extensive burning of brash, a practice which had caused considerable public outcry last year and could possibly lead to a nuisance abatement order being placed on the Conservators as had happened at Farnham Common. A chipper would avoid this and would also be an important part of a local bio-fuel and/or compost project.

Mr Glyn commented that an HLS expenditure budget of £150,000 for conservation would make restoration of heathland difficult. Mr Gillham commented that as the heathland was restored, a larger area would need to be maintained. It was agreed that a meeting with the County Council and the Ashdown Forest Trust should be arranged to discuss the landowner's responsibilities to look after the biodiversity of an SSSI. HLS funding should have no impact on this responsibility.

The proposed high cost of stakeholder engagement was reviewed. The Clerk stated that stakeholder engagement had been a condition of HLS funding. He suggested that the meetings

planned could be condensed although he felt the presentation of the Forest Plan may need some assistance. The report of the summer meetings with the Parishes was in preparation by 3KQ and the suggested development of the web site as a major source of communication had been taken on board and was a great success with considerable feedback. Mr Barnes commented that the Board had agreed to Phase 1 of the consultation process, Phase 2 had not been agreed and the governance meetings had not worked so well. This was no fault of 3KQ who had made useful suggestions on the Forest Plan and were able to comment on it in a detached way. He suggested that in future no more expenditure should be undertaken before 3KQ's proposals had been seen and the Clerk should prepare a plan which would show how much could be taken in house.

Mr Thornely-Taylor suggested that the overspend on the grazing project be authorised as the project had advanced at a quicker pace than anticipated. This was agreed.

Mr Gillham commented that tighter budgeting control would be necessary in future.

**Mr Thornely-Taylor proposed that the Committee recommend to the Board that the revised budget for 2007/2008 and the estimated budget for 2008/2009 be accepted with the proviso that the estimated ESCC contribution be excluded from the revised budgets and the subsequent deficit be presented as the figure due from ESCC under the terms of the Ashdown Forest Act 1974.**

3.ii Fees for 2008/2009

**The Committee recommend that the Board accept the revised charges for 2008/2009.**

3.iii Proposed Forest Rate

There was a discussion over the expense of collecting the Forest Rate. The Clerk said that there were growing numbers of Commoners opting to pay by direct debit.

**The Committee recommend that the Board accept the proposed Forest Rate increases be sent to the Secretary of State for the Environment for his approval.**

3.iv Risk management policy

The office had been informed that the 2004/2005 Accounts could not be signed off by the District Auditor without sight of the Board's Risk Management Policy. Once this had been done, the following years' accounts could also be signed off.

It was noted that there was little mention of health and safety and Mrs Marriott was asked to amend the policy accordingly. She explained that the document had been compiled with the help of the Practitioner's Guide for the Governance and Accountability in Local Councils in England and Wales but the suggested amendment would present no problem.

**The Committee recommend the Board accept the amended Risk Management Policy.**

Mr Marrable and Mrs Temple left the meeting.

#### **4 Forest Plan – the FGP Committee contribution**

4.i The Clerk introduced the Plan. He stated that it was developed from the annual Forest Action Plan and reflected feedback from the stakeholder governance meetings. Concern was

expressed that the three parts of the plan should have a uniform presentation and should not be so proscriptive that the Board was left with little room to manoeuvre or committed the Board to a particular action. It was felt that the Plan should state the overall vision of the Board, with clear high-level strategy statements. All subsequent plans should cascade from these. Mr Barnes stated that the Plan should not anticipate a long-term decline of income from local councils. The Clerk's suggestion that there should be an opportunity in the Plan for the public to state in brief their vision for the Forest for the year 2030 was welcomed by the Committee.

4.ii It was agreed that the Chairmen of the Committees would meet in order to homogenise the overall Plan and review the introduction (that the Clerk has written) before the final presentation to the Board.

## **5 New Policies**

5.i The Clerk explained that the Grievance, Discipline and Dignity at Work policies had been based on the County Council's procedures with appropriate amendments. The final documents had been passed by an officer of the County Council's Human Resources department. It was agreed that a review date would be set by the Board.

**The Committee recommend the Board accept and implement the new policies.**

5.ii Freedom of Information policy Concern was expressed that the Board should not be expected to answer historic questions. Any such queries should be referred to the County Record Office. It was agreed that the policy should be worded very carefully to allow maximum transparency with regard to decision making and answers to legitimate questions should be in the fullest manner possible in a reasonable time.

## **6 Potential income from the Forestry Commission UK Woodland Assurance Scheme**

6.i The Clerk distributed a paper describing the scheme. The cost should be allocated to the professional fees budget. The Clerk was asked to investigate what would be required of the Board to receive the grant from the Forestry Commission.

## **7 Standing Orders**

7.i It was agreed that the amendment to 8.1 should read "No Conservator shall at a Meeting disregard the ruling of the Chairman, wilfully obstruct business, or behave in such a manner as to cause offence to any Conservator or any other person."

7.ii It was agreed that under 2 ORDER OF MEETINGS, after

"Each Board and committee Meeting will be open to the public. The public may ask questions for a total of ten minutes before the start."

The following should be added:

"In addition to the above, members of the public may submit questions in writing, not less than 14 days before the relevant Board or Committee meeting. These should be sent to the Forest Centre for the attention of the Superintendent or the relevant Chairman. The questioner should state whether a written or verbal reply is required. If the latter, it will be given during the 10 minute period provided the questioner is present. It is not envisaged that supplementary questions would be allowed, unless time permitted."

7.iii **The Committee agreed to recommend to the Board that it accept the above amendments.**

## **8 Automated Credit Machine**

8.i Mrs Marriott stated that, for trading purposes, the Board had joined the Federation of Small Businesses which had enabled the acquisition of an ACM for use in the shop. The terms were favourable and would allow for a significant increase in sales.

## **9 Any Urgent Item of which the Chairman has notice**

9.i Cats Protection The Clerk informed the Committee that he had now received the report of the Expert's Determination. It was a large document and it was agreed that an electronic copy should be requested.

The long-term gain for the Forest was welcomed and it was agreed that a precedent had been set. It was felt that significant lessons could be learned and the Clerk would be able to respond to any accusations from the public. Mr Thornely-Taylor asked that the Clerk produce an accurate and agreed history paper for the Board.

9.ii Ashdown Forest Life Mr Cooper congratulated the Clerk on the current issue of the newsletter. He thought it would contribute significantly to the public's understanding of the Conservators' objectives.

The meeting finished at 1725.