

## Minutes of the

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

1430, Monday 3 November 2008  
Education Barn, Ashdown Forest Centre

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

Also present: Cllr J Barnes (*ex-officio*), Mr M Cooper, Mr E Stenhouse. Mrs R Marriott for agenda item 26/08.

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

#### **24/08 Apologies.**

Apologies had been received from Mr J Spicer

#### **25/08 Declarations of Interest by Members of a Personal or Prejudicial Nature.**

Mr Galley and Mr Stenhouse both declared a personal interest in agenda item 28/08 as they are both horse riders.

#### **26/08 Financial Report (year to date) – FGP 9.**

The document had been pre-circulated. The Chairman gave a brief explanation of points of interest and drew the Committee's attention to the HLS versus 'other' spending split on page one and the comparison versus revised forecast on page two. The Clerk explained that the revised forecast for transport and machinery included the running costs, maintenance and insurance of all Forest vehicles and that the figure for the pond survey should be £3,560.00 not £4,000.00.

The Clerk commented that there needed to be some improvement in the presentation of the figures and that there should be internal consistency in the nomenclature, some further clarification on bracken work and some stump work had in fact been doubled up.

There was a short discussion regarding using Natural England field numbers rather than the current compartment numbers. The Clerk stated he would discuss this possibility further with Mr Marrable. Cllr Barnes stated that for ease of understanding the Committee should have greater detail to explain why some compartments were more expensive than others. The Clerk said that the type and amount of work in the compartments differed.

There was a short discussion regarding the NE payment shortfall that was based on areas, the overpayment and the promise of a special payment. The Clerk confirmed that the expected payment based on areas had now been received, the overpayment issue had been rectified but the special payment had not yet been received.

The cash projection on page four was discussed and the Clerk stated that the HLF bid must be borne in mind. The Chairman stated that some revision to cash projection must be expected to ensure sufficient liquidity.

There was a short discussion regarding the policy of having reserve funds to cover six-months of salary. The Chairman stated that the year end appeared to be satisfactory but January 2009 required careful handling and phasing of payments need to be borne in mind.

There was a short discussion regarding the security of banking arrangements given the current financial climate. There was a short discussion regarding placing monies or reserves with East Sussex County Council for added security and Cllr Reid offered to communicate with the appropriate person at County for feedback and advice. Cllr Whetstone commented that there needed to be some evaluation of the risk and a realistic view taken. The Chairman replied that the Board had the responsibility to ensure reserves were secure and if there was a risk free option it should be fully explored.

There was a brief discussion regarding the recent pay award and Mrs Marriott confirmed that the 2.5% had been budgeted for and the national agreement was 2.4%.

Page five was discussed. The Clerk reported that the situation with WDC grants had now changed. Applications could not be submitted until November with grants being made in March. Mr Galley said that all budgets were under pressure and that WDC were simply reassessing how money was being spent, which was not unreasonable. Cllr Whetstone and Cllr Stogdon asked to see the paperwork the Clerk was submitting to WDC and the Clerk agreed to circulate it by e-mail.

There was concern about recording a zero under ESCC and WDC contributions on page five. The Clerk explained that estimates were sent to ESCC under the provisions of the Ashdown Forest Act and this was understood by the Committee. Cllr Barnes suggested that an estimated or provisional figure would be more appropriate and that this should be explained in a footnote.

There was a short discussion regarding WDC appointees to the Board and WDC contributions. The Chairman stated that if WDC fails to make a contribution there was little the Board could do about it. Mr Cooper commented that WDC promoted the Forest and added to the pressures and thus had a responsibility to support the Board in a pecuniary manner. The Chairman suggested that personal contact with WDC should be made. The Clerk replied that much personal contact with WDC was being made behind the scenes; that he had met with WDC to assist with completing the grant application forms; Mr Cussons, a Cabinet Member, had visited the Forest and that Cllr Martin was encouraging councillors to pay visits. Cllr Whetstone replied that the completion of the grant application forms was a policy matter and not just an administrative one and that it was, in his view, important that senior Board members talk to WDC.

There was then a discussion regarding ESCC contributions and Cllr Reid stated he remained alarmed to see a zero. He went on to say a dialogue needed to take place and Cllr Whetstone said that any expectation for ESCC simply to make up a shortfall was an unrealistic one. Cllr Barnes replied that a dialogue about the estimates would be useful especially as ESCC expected a 10% shortfall as had been discussed elsewhere earlier in the year. There then followed a discussion about achieving a 10% budget cut and the Chairman considered whether ESCC taking over the paying of contractors would allow the claiming back of VAT. He went on to say that, if appropriate, a meeting with County should be held and the lines of communication should be opened. Cllr Reid suggested that the Clerk should initiate a meeting with Mrs Hemesley, of Transport and Environment. Cllr Barnes said that the Board should be thinking about contingency plans. The Chairman stated that he hoped a resolved budget should be ready for the March FGP meeting.

Page seven was examined and some inconsistent naming was again noted. Mr Galley commented that he would welcome a half page summary containing factual items and pertinent issues to aid his understanding of what was required.

## **27/08 Board Policy on Freedom of Information Act – FGP 10**

The document had been pre-circulated and was discussed at length. It was agreed that in (2) the terms “aim to” or “seek to” respond to “reasonable” requests be added and that the 30 day

response time be removed. Cllr Barnes stated that the Board have always tried to respond to reasonable requests.

There was a short discussion regarding documents that were held at the Forest Centre and the Clerk confirmed that there was nothing pre 1980 on site and that historical records were held at the County Record Office in Lewes.

There was general agreement that access needed to be controlled, that those requesting access come to the Forest Centre and that a small charge could be made.

The Chairman asked that the suggested changes be made, that the Clerk check those changes were not at variation from the Freedom of Information Act and its Guidance.

**It was agreed, subject to the changes being made, that the draft policy be recommended to the Board.**

#### **28/08 Agreement of charges for activities 2009 - 2010 – FGP 11**

The document had been pre-circulated and was discussed. The 4.8% increase in RPI as of 24 October was, it was agreed, an established principle.

The ice cream licence was discussed at length. It was noted there were few suppliers in the area. Mr Stenhouse asked about changing the terms of the licence. There was a discussion about the pros and cons of tendering and it was agreed that the tender process should continue as before.

The Clerk reported that school visits were now made under the auspices of Sussex Wildlife Trust.

Riding permits were discussed and the proposal set out in footnote 2 was thought to be a reasonable suggestion.

**It was agreed that footnote 2 on riding permit charges be recommended to the Board.**

#### **29/08 Agreement of Forest Rate – FGP 12**

The document had been pre-circulated and was discussed. It was agreed that the document be sent to the Secretary of State for approval.

**It was agreed the Forest Rate for 2009 / 2010 be recommended to the Board.**

#### **30/08 HLF Bid Forest Ridge Project Proposals – FGP 13**

*30.1/08 – Combined project milestones*

*30.2/08 – Development Phase General Project Proposal - Education*

*30.3/08 – Development Phase General Project Proposal - Interpretation*

The document had been pre-circulated. The Clerk explained the background to the HLF bid and reported that its success had not yet been announced. He reported that funds were available from The Friends of Ashdown Forest, the Ashdown Forest Conservation Trust and the Rotherwick Foundation. He went on to say that Mrs Temple would be helping put together a detailed cash flow forecast and reported that HLF pays retrospectively therefore any purchases required careful timing.

The Clerk reported that the scheme was due to commence on 1 January 2009 and would last three years. The largest expenditure related to the document numbered PA01 which included refurbishment of the interpretation in the Information Barn and putting historical Board minutes on line. He went on to say separate meetings may be needed when the outcome of the bid was known.

Mr Stenhouse queried phase one of the visitor centre development, for which there were no costings, and the HLF bid and asked if one was going ahead without the other. The Clerk replied that the two were separate issues and one did not depend on the other. The Chairman asked if our lack of compliance with DDA would have an effect on the HLF funding and the Clerk replied it would not as there ways of overcoming our current lack of compliance.

The Clerk reported that the High Weald Unit was the main mover on the HLF bid and stated that the bid was not designed to attract more visitors rather to educate those who already visit the Forest. Cllr Whetstone commented that local people did not visit the Forest Centre and the Clerk stated that he would be able to give greater detail as to where visitors come from once the visitor survey was published. However, a survey of four years ago showed the majority of visitors were indeed local.

The Clerk reported that the value of the bid was £250,000 over the three year period, some of which was met against expenditure already incurred, i.e., the archaeology project funded under HLS. Cllr Stogdon asked what the gain was for the Board and the Clerk replied there was not a profit for the Board. Mr Cooper said that there was no financial gain but the Board was getting other things instead.

The Clerk said that initially he would have to spend some time on the project but the majority of the day-to-day delivery would be done by contractors and his time would be evenly spread out over three years. Cllr Whetstone asked what things the Clerk would not be spending time on and the Clerk replied that the Forest Plan was done and Stakeholder Engagement completed his job was evolving and changing and he expected to spend about 10% of his time on HLF. He went on to say there was now extra help in the office and he would be dropping things. Cllr Barnes stated that queries such as these had come up at the Board meeting when the project was initially authorised.

Mr Cooper stated that there was a positive side to the HLF bid and asked that the Committee be more positive, that it was a step forward for the Forest and it was good to pro-actively educate and take steps to better inform visitors. The Clerk stated that the project would be informing and managing rather than promoting and the best advertisement for the Forest was the Forest itself.

The Chairman stated that, if the bid was successful, a further meeting would be required.

### **31/08 Any Urgent Item of which the Clerk has notice in order to pass to the elected Chairman**

*Further proposed amendments to the Standing Orders*

There was none

### **32/08 Any other business**

Christmas tree sales were briefly discussed. The Clerk reported that there may not be a saleable product this year due to the young pines yellowing. Mr Stenhouse thought this may be because of the wet conditions this year.

Cllr Reid asked about the policy on paying creditors and the Clerk reported it was 30 days or less.

*The meeting finished at 17.00.*