

Minutes of the

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

1430, Monday 2 November 2009
Lancaster Room, Ashdown Forest Centre

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

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

20/09 Apologies.

There were no formal apologies.

21/09 Declarations of many interests by Members of a Personal or Prejudicial Nature

Although five members of the Committee own properties whose accesses cross Forest land, none had a Perpetual Licence so it was agreed that they could participate in the discussion under 26/09, namely Minute 29.4/09 of the Roads Planning and Amenity Committee meeting of 26 October and the accompanying paper RPA18.

22/09 Financial Report

22.1/09 The Chairman drew the Committee's attention to the deficit forecast for the current year. He pointed out that this was due to the request by the Rural Payments Agency for the repayment of £37,292 Single Farm Payment. The Clerk confirmed that he had received a letter from the RPA acknowledging receipt of Mr Marrable's letter which had outlined the history of the matter and requested a phased repayment. It was agreed that the repayment should be made within the current financial year.

22.1/09 The Clerk gave a more detailed explanation of some of the expenditure figures: the Forest products sold included such items as Christmas trees and a new venture, bagged logs; the Vachery expenditure was covered by grants given to the Friends of Ashdown Forest by British American Tobacco and a private individual specifically for the renovation of the Vachery Forest Garden and the marketing costs for the grazing project were shared with the Heathland Hebridean Project partners.

22.3/09 Mr Spicer expressed his concern as to what was to happen when the current Grazing Project ended in May 2010. Mr Glyn confirmed that the Conservation Committee is reviewing the future of the project and will be taking a close look at the economics. The Chairman expressed his concern about the Board's finances after the Higher Level Stewardship grant finishes.

22.4/09 It was agreed that a small rearrangement of the figures would help to clarify the current state of the Board's finances. Mr Reid was assured that the Higher Level Stewardship grant was confirmed. He recommended that a meeting with the financial officers at County Hall be arranged.

23/09 Agree scope of internal audit

It was agreed to defer this item until a definite proposal was presented for consideration.

24/09 Agree Forest Rate

24.1/09 The proposed figures showed that there will be no increase in the Forest Rate during 2010/2011.

24.2/09 The Committee agreed the Forest Rate for 2010/2011 for formal approval by the Board.

25/09 Agree charges for activities

25.1/09 It was agreed that the term RPI should be used rather than inflation. It was agreed that a fourth column be added to the figures to show the estimated income for the forthcoming year. In addition, all figures should be shown net of VAT with a footnote to explain that VAT will have increased to 17.5% next year. It was felt that the economic climate would make any increase indefensible.

25.2/09 It was agreed that there should be no increase in the fees during 2010/2011.

26/09 Any urgent item of which the Clerk has notice in order to pass to the elected Chairman.

26.1/09 The Clerk presented the Minutes of the RPA Committee and the accompanying paper RPA18. It was noted that there was a typographical error on page 2 and the proposal should read "Bands A-D pay the 'base rate' of a £55.00 annual Acknowledgment Rent and bands E-H to pay base rate x 1.5 (i.e. £82.50)".

26.2/09 The Clerk pointed out that the RPA Committee had accepted the proposals with one objection. He had been looking at ways to consolidate the Board's funds and felt that this proposal was one possibility. Mr Whetstone acknowledged this but stated that there needed to be a logical reason for the increase. Mr Thornely-Taylor commented that there was a need to distinguish the difference between the Perpetual Licence granted to the Cats Protection which had been for a new access, and the Perpetual Licences to domestic properties. The latter were to enable the maintenance of the tracks and service pipes; no charge could be made for crossing common land. Mr Parsons acknowledged the logic of licences to commercial properties being linked to their Rateable Value and those for domestic properties being linked to the Council Tax banding. However, he felt the consequences should be explored.

26.3/09 Mr Galley thought no snap decisions should be made and suggested that the F&GP Committee should look at income generation for the Board. Mr Reid agreed and commented that the Committee should be looking at the control of both income and expenditure in view of the trend lines. Mr Parsons felt that as the RPA papers were now in the public domain, the F&GP Committee would need more time to consider the proposals. The Clerk asked for guidance on the way forward. Mr Reid said that a business case needed to be made and that he should be ready to make comments on how he proposed to make savings.

26.4/09 The Chairman drew the discussion to a close and proposed that the following comment be put before the Board: "The Committee shows little enthusiasm for the proposal in its present form and wishes to see a further and wider discussion of the Conservators' finances." The Committee voted as follows: four for - the Chairman, Cllr R Galley, Cllr T Reid and Mr J Spicer; two against -Mr P Glyn and Mr M Hoy; and two abstentions - Mr R Parsons and Mr T Thornely-Taylor.

The meeting closed at 1705.