

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

1400, Monday 5 September 2005

Ashdown Forest Centre

**Minutes**

Present: Mr R. Parsons (Chairman), Mr M. Cooper, Mr P. Glyn, Dr H. Prendergast (Clerk), Mr F. Whetstone (arrived 1410), Mr A. White  
Apologies: Mr A. Reid, Mr R. Stogdon  
Also present: Mr J. Barnes, Mr F. Brown (arrived 1430), Mr F. Marshall (arrived 1430), Mrs J. Wirdnam

**1) A business proposal to the Board**

This item was discussed in Confidential Session (see separate page).

**2) Development of the Forest Centre.**

Dr Prendergast reported on progress.

- 1) Consulting engineers had completed their survey of the Centre's buildings. There are no serious problems but crack markers will need further monitoring.
- 2) A brief for a business/development plan for the Forest Centre had been sent out for tender and a decision would be made on the award of the contract on 22 September. The plan must be submitted by 23 December. Help on drawing up the brief had been provided by the High Weald Unit (HWU) and Sussex Enterprise.
- 3) A catering specialist had been hired for four days to advise on how to set up a facility, and provide options on staffing, siting, and financial projections. The work will be completed by the end of September and its results made available to the contractor in 2) above.
- 4) A chartered architect, a specialist in old barns, has been hired for 30 hours to do some initial architectural drawings of how the future Centre might look according to the latest ideas. The drawings will be made available to the contractor in 2) above.
- 5) Outline funding proposals for future interpretation and education on the Forest are being submitted to the HWU as part of the latter's bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund. Much of the proposal is based on the *Ashdown Forest area interpretation strategy* produced for the HWU (but with substantial input from the Forest) in May 2005. A further document is being submitted to HWU in September on access to the Forest.
- 6) The Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Service carried out a *Quality assessment report* on the Forest Centre on 2 August. The Centre was not of a high enough standard to achieve accreditation. However, the assessor described the plans for the Centre as "very encouraging".

The Committee agreed to Mr Whetstone's suggestion that the final figure for the contractor should be approved by the Urgency Committee. It was also suggested that new members of the Board should be offered a tour of the Centre to hear of the development ideas. Mr Glyn concluded the discussion by observing that there is no hope of managing visitors if the Forest Centre is not developed up to a national level.

### **3) Re-presentation of the 2004/2005 accounts to illustrate (only) use of the new cost centres**

Dr Prendergast handed out a summary of the accounts according to the major divisions of Finance and Support, Amenity and Community and Conservation. The accounts will no longer be presented in the old system. The new one allows for more detailed itemisation of expenditure and easier budgeting. The time sheets now being filled out, following the same divisions, by all field staff will also allow better itemisation of how the Forest spends its working time. Mr Cooper commented that time-sheets were a management tool and were not necessarily of any interest to the Committee.

### **4) Staffing matters**

David King, Ranger of the West Chase, has tendered his resignation after 13 years on the Forest. His new post is as warden for the Kent Wildlife Trust at a gravel pit site near Sevenoaks.

Dr Prendergast said he will be trying to recruit a 1 day/week litter picker and that he is applying to the Ashdown Forest Trust to support a 2 days/week, 3 year FTA Bye-law Enforcement Officer. The Committee supported this idea.

### **5) AOB**

Dr Prendergast said that the latest quote for the construction of a barn at Whitehouse Farm came to ca. £61,000. Mr Barnes said it was important to assess maintenance costs.

Mr Parsons made some comments on the new Ashdown Forest map and congratulated staff (Roger Beal, Chris Marrable, Hew Prendergast) who had appeared in the Meridian TV programme about the Forest screened on 30 August.

There was some discussion of the access from the A275 to the Cat Protection site. Mr Parsons reminded the Committee that the matter was being handled by the Urgency Committee. An offer for a licence fee had been made by Cats Protection to which the Board will have to respond.

On the perpetual licence that was originally granted to the company developing Wrens Warren, Mr White thought that he recalled that, once the houses were sold, the new owners would have to obtain their own licences. The Committee asked for this to be checked up.

The meeting finished at 1702.

**CONFIDENTIAL SESSION**  
**Item 1 of the FGP Committee meeting of 5 September 2005**

**A business proposal to the Board**

The Committee had previously been circulated an outline of a proposal by Mr Richard Reagan of Forest Row. He began by passing round a print-out of his presentation and recounted that he had first contacted Dr Prendergast in late 2004 with the idea of setting up a joint venture with the Forest to produce Pooh Sticks. He had long wondered why no one had already developed them; it was a product “waiting to happen”. With Dr Prendergast he had visited Disney in London (in early 2005) to meet Amanda Saborn-Hutt, Senior Category Manager, who is responsible for merchandising in the UK and also on Disney’s worldwide merchandising committee. He had since met members of Disney’s marketing and manufacturing side. Disney liked the tie-up of the idea with the Forest. The market for Pooh products is huge, worth \$5.3 billion/year to Disney, and accessed internationally by Disney via hundreds of thousands of distribution points. The Sticks would therefore be entering an existing global market.

The essence of the idea is to produce wafer-thin sticks that are simple to make from wood cut on the Forest; they are then stamped and dyed with some representation of a Pooh figure, and packaged in small cellophane wraps. The first step would be market testing with the help of Disney. Mr Reagan estimated an 18 month set-up time. Each set of twigs would cost 10-20p to produce, selling wholesale at 60p. One projection he offered (detailed in the print-out) showed production of 600,000 packs/year (not a lot in manufacturing terms) and revenue of £28k/month. He thought that the business would build up over 2-3 years before reaching an annual income ceiling.

Points that emerged during discussion were:

- Disney sells licences to manufacture Pooh products; if this idea goes no further, Disney could get other people to take it forward;
- the message of sustainability was important, from the cutting of wood (a renewable resource) to the use of vegetable dyes in the Sticks;
- the idea, according to Mr Reagan, was essentially an export one (especially to Japan) although the Sticks could be sold here;
- the critical points, according to Mr Cooper, related to the cost of products and volume of sales;
- Mr Reagan had no particular agenda regarding his relationship with the Forest and thought that exterior funding would not be difficult; he would be prepared to put his own funds into the project too.

Other sources of funds suggested were in relation to woodland development and local employment and from the EU. Mr Barnes mentioned ESCC’s offer of grants to rural enterprise and thought that setting up an entity separate from the Forest would not be difficult. From the ESCC perspective, a new income stream for the Forest would be attractive. Mr Cooper thought that there might be no need for any financial risk, but commitment to the idea was key. He suggested that a detailed business plan would need to be prepared and that the Board would have to agree to the whole idea in principle.

Mr Reagan left the meeting at 1457.

Mr Whetstone said how important it was to ensure a constant supply of wood, and work out how much is needed/year. Mr Barnes said he would hate to see the idea taken

forward with no benefit to the Forest now that Disney know of it and commented that it would not be unattractive to take control of Pooh Corner (the shop in Hartfield).

**The Committee recommended that the Board should continue to explore the principle of a joint commercial venture.**

The Confidential Session finished at 1527.