

Minutes of the

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

1430, Monday 4 September 2006
Lancaster Room, Ashdown Forest Centre

Present Cllr R. Parsons (Chairman), Cllr J Barnes, Mr P. Glyn, Cllr A Reid,
Cllr R. Stogdon, Cllr R. Thornley-Taylor, Cllr F. Whetstone.

Also present Mrs R. Marriott (Office Manager took the Minutes), Mr L Gillham,
Mr C. Marrable (Conservation Officer), Mr J. Spicer.

1) Apologies

Mr M. Cooper, Dr H.D.V. Prendergast.

2) Declarations of interest. There were none.

3) Finance items

The Accounts for 2005/2006 The definitive version of the 2005/2006 accounts, with typographical errors corrected, was presented. Concern was expressed at the delay in the District Auditor's scrutiny and the effect this could have on the public's perception of the Board's management. It was agreed that both Mr Glyn and Cllr Barnes would write to the District Auditor and seek a deadline. It was felt that the layout of the Board's accounts could lead to confusion and it was agreed that some modifications would be required next year but the current accounts, having been agreed by the Board at the June meeting, would remain essentially the same. New arrangements for the external audit have been circulated; it would appear that the process will use simplified audit forms. The cost increases with income but fees will be fixed for five years.

Cash flow forecast Mr Glyn outlined the importance of Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) to the management of the Forest. It is the best vehicle for meeting the requirement to have the Forest, as a SSSI, in a favourable condition by 2010 and is the preferred vehicle of Natural England. If the Board opts out of HLS, it will still need to comply with the SSSI requirements. The Board would not be able to generate sufficient funds and Natural England could take over the management of the heathland. The Board would have to derogate control although it would still be responsible for meeting the requirements. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 also puts an obligation on the Ashdown Forest Trust to maintain biodiversity; failure to stay in HLS would have financial implications for the Trust too. It was agreed that the Trust should be informed of the possible implications for the Trustees.

Although the Forest's heathlands had been admitted to HLS on 1 August 2006, concern was expressed that there was no written guarantee that HLS funds would be paid on 1 February 2007. In view of the problems many farmers had experience with the Single Farm Payment, it was agreed that the Board should have a back-up financial plan should

the money not be forthcoming. Failure to receive the grant from Defra would leave the Board with a serious cash flow problem.

Mr Marrable informed the Committee that he was working closely with Defra to develop the Management Plan which had to be in place by 1 February 2007 in order for the funds to be released. He envisaged that this would be a strategic document signed with Natural England from which a working plan, that would deal with the daily management of the heathland, would be developed. The Rural Development Service was very keen that the Forest succeed. The first payment would be dependent on acceptance of the Management Plan and the money could be spent on anything to do with the conservation of the heathland. The Board were in an advantageous position as it would have funds in hand for future heathland conservation work. If the Management Plan was not ready, or if the Board decided to opt out, the Board could withdraw from HLS on 1 February 2007. It had another opportunity to opt out in five years time.

The Committee agreed to seek written confirmation that the funds could be used for the following:

- 1 to pay for the winter conservation work already contracted
- 2 to pay for work that had been funded by Countryside Stewardship Schemes in the past (clarification of the term "additionality" in the agreement)
- 3 to pay for inhouse work. The reintroduction of timesheets to facilitate the calculation of costs involved is planned.

The Committee recommend that a monthly cash flow forecast be produced as an essential tool to manage resources. A two year forecast should be produced when funds were established. While attention should be focused on the completion of the Management Plan, a back-up financial plan should be prepared and the Ashdown Forest Trust should be kept informed.

4) Major Projects

HLS A discussion took place about stakeholders. It was agreed that this would be one of the first tasks given to the independent consultancy that will be engaged to assist the Board with its obligations under HLS to engage with stakeholders in all aspects of the management of the heathland. It was agreed that a press release should be issued after the next Board meeting.

Although the appointment of the current consultants, 3KQ, had not gone out to tender, it had been considered expedient for them to continue at this stage of the stakeholder engagement process as they had assisted English Nature with similar tasks in the past. The Board will have every opportunity to ask questions after the presentation and will be able to ascertain its suitability then. The consultation exercise is covered by the HLS agreement.

Parkin Report Concern was expressed at the number of projects in hand. Whilst supporting the phase one development in principle (new Information Barn, entrance, access and car park), it was agreed that the current priority should be on HLS. However, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 implications of Centre development should not be ignored and work will need to be done prior to discussions with Natural England and the planning authorities.

The Committee recommends that the development of the Forest Centre should be reviewed at the beginning of March 2007 when the appointment of a Finance Director could be brought forward.

Whitehouse Barn Mr Marshall had been liaising with the developer and had reported to Mr Parsons that there were a few minor problems that needed to be solved: some strengthening of the cattle barriers was needed, and the entrance gate needed to be hung. Some cracks in the concrete had occurred as it had been poured during the heatwave. A solution had been found and it was anticipated that the barn would be completed and ready for use by the next Board meeting. The final payment was being held back until Mr Marshall was satisfied that all was well. A second draft licence to occupy had been prepared, based on the terms of agreement which had already been signed.

There had been an error in the newsletter on the back of the Forest Rate demand. It was agreed that a statement should be made stating that the land had been given to the Board and that both the barn and the land belong to the Conservators.

Cats Protection Mr Glyn informed the Committee that Mr T. Raikes is scrutinising the final document to be sent to the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors.

5 Staffing Matters

There was a general discussion about the changing nature of the demands made on Forest staff. Concern was expressed over the number of projects in hand.

The Committee recommend that a working party should, whilst taking into account the findings of the Forest Centre working group, review personnel needs within the office and prioritise and monitor the projects in hand against available resources. This should be done before any further appointments are made.

6 Future areas of expenditure

PR The subject was not discussed.

Legislation confusion Mr Glyn drew the Committee's attention to three Acts that could be in conflict with the Ashdown Forest Act 1974: the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, the Commons Act 2006 and the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. He thought the Board may need to seek Counsels advice. He had already spoken to the Legal Department of East Sussex County Council. Cllr Barnes agreed to follow up the query.

The meeting finished at 1720.