

Minutes of the

MEETING OF THE BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST

1000, Monday 18 September 2006
Ashdown Forest Centre

Present Mr P. Glyn (in the Chair), Cllr J. Barnes, Cllr F. Brown, Mr M. Cooper, Mr L. Gillham, Mr F. Marshall, Cllr Mrs R. O'Keeffe, Cllr R. Parsons, Dr H. Prendergast (Clerk), Cllr R. St. Pierre, Cllr R. Stogdon, Mr R. Thornely-Taylor and Cllr F. Whetstone.

Minutes taken by Mrs R. Marriott.

The Chairman opened the meeting and welcomed the members of the public present. He explained that the Agenda was to be amended to include the consideration of employing 3KQ, specialists in stakeholder engagement.

ITEM 1 Apologies for absence

1.1 Apologies were received from Cllr S. Radford-Kirby, Cllr A. Reid and Mr J Spicer.

ITEM 2 Stakeholder engagement

2.1.1 The Board discussed the presentation given earlier in the morning by 3KQ. Given that stakeholder engagement in the management of the heathland is a requirement of Higher Level Scheme (HLS), it was agreed that the employment of consultants was the way forward. 3KQ had already done some work on stakeholder views and perceptions and it was agreed that the experience and professionalism of 3KQ would benefit the Forest and enhance the fulfilment of HLS obligations.

2.1.2 Concern was expressed over the ability of Defra to pay the funds on time. It was acknowledged that this was a political matter which was out of the Board's control. It was agreed that it would be wise to develop a "Plan B" to safeguard the essential conservation work required by the Forest's status as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. It was agreed that the F&GP Committee would consider the matter at its next meeting.

2.1.3 Concern was also expressed about the long-term staffing implications. Subsequent work would depend on the success of the bid and the arrival of the funds.

2.1.4 It was proposed by Mr Glyn and seconded by Mr Whetstone that 3KQ would be appointed to manage the first stage of the stakeholder engagement process. The Board agreed with one abstention by Cllr Brown.

ITEM 3 To approve the Minutes of the Meeting held on 19 June 2006 and matters arising

3.1 The typographical error in the Minutes at 2.1 were amended to read:

"The Committee agreed for the Chairman to visit Cats Protection soon after the above date."

3.2 Cllr Whetstone drew the Board's attention to 4.2.9. He asked where it was stated that the Board had a responsibility to educate. In reply, both Mr Glyn and Cllr Barnes felt the

management of the Forest as an amenity, required by the Ashdown Forest Act 1974, was greatly helped by improving the knowledge and understanding of visitors.

3.3 The Chairman moved the adoption of the Minutes with the amendment. This was agreed.

ITEM 4 To approve the Minutes of the Conservation Committee held on 3 July 2006

4.1 The Minutes of the last Meeting had been previously circulated. Mr Glyn took questions.

4.2 Mr Whetstone expressed his regret that there was no opportunity to discuss the Annual Report.

4.3 HLS Mr Thornely-Taylor recommended that the Committee should look at work that had been done in the Yorkshire Dales on specific breeds of animals suitable for conservation grazing. Mr Glyn referred the Board to an English Nature report on the subject.

4.4 Deer Initiative

4.4.1 Mr Whetstone felt the deer “black spots” should be publicised. He expressed his concern about the increase in vegetation at the roadside. A discussion ensued over the merits and disadvantages of cutting the branches back to create wider verges. Mr Marshall said that Hartfield Parish Council would be writing to the Clerk with a list of roadside hedges on the Forest that needed cutting back in their Parish. Cllr Barnes suggested that two comparable areas should be created, one with vegetation left and one with vegetation cleared and a wide verge created. Monitoring of the two areas would then provide some factual evidence.

4.4.2 The Clerk informed the Board that there was to be a meeting of the Ashdown Area Deer Group the following day when successful practical measures of deer management would be discussed. Persuading traffic to reduce its speed remained the most successful method of reducing deer casualties. Members of the Deer Group had nationwide expertise and experience. Mr Glyn thought it appropriate that the Clerk chair the meetings as deer casualties are having an increasing impact on staff time.

4.4.3 Mr Brown asked how far the deer roam. Mr Glyn replied that, while there used to be a nucleus herd in Pippingford Park, now there are populations throughout Sussex.

4.5 There being no further comments, Mr Glyn moved the adoption of the Minutes. This was agreed.

ITEM 5 To receive the Minutes of the Roads, Planning and Amenity Committee Meeting held on 24 April 2006

5.1 The Minutes had been previously circulated. Mr Marshall took questions.

5.2 Visitor numbers It was agreed that it would be helpful to have the visitor numbers to the temporary exhibitions included with the minutes. The Clerk said that there had been considerable media interest in the current exhibition commemorating the 80th anniversary of the publishing of the first Winnie-the-Pooh book.

5.3 Car park charges It was drawn to the Board’s attention that East Sussex County Council charges voluntary fees in some of its car parks, for example at Seven Sisters Country Park and Beachy Head. It was pointed out that the situation was totally different on the Forest:

the purpose of the car parks on the Forest was to take traffic off the roadsides in multiple places, whereas the ESCC car parks served individual tourist attractions.

- 5.4 There being no further comments, the Minutes were then approved and signed as an accurate record.

ITEM 6 To receive the Minutes of the Finance & General Purposes Committee Meeting held on 4 September 2006

- 6.1 The Minutes had been previously circulated. Questions were taken by Cllr Parsons.

6.2 HLS

- 6.2.1 Cllr Barnes emphasised the importance of admission into HLS; if the Board did nothing, there was a risk of government agencies taking over the management of the Forest. He had sought legal advice from the County Solicitor about the interaction of various recent statutes and awaited a response. Mr Glyn pointed out that the status of the Forest as a SSSI necessitated involvement by English Nature.
- 6.2.2 Cllr Whetstone expressed his concern that Mr Marrable, the Conservation Officer, was taking on too much responsibility for the negotiations. He was also concerned at the dual role of English Nature; the Board was negotiating with it whilst at the same time taking its advice. He felt the Board should have its own advisors.
- 6.2.3 The Clerk assured the Board that whilst he had overseen the wider aspects of the negotiations, including those of archaeology and education, which led the Forest to be admitted to HLS on 1 August 2006, Mr Marrable had been the best person to take the lead on the technical negotiations due to his profound knowledge of the Forest's heathlands. Cllr Parsons agreed; he considered Mr Marrable's expertise would be invaluable to English Nature and Defra in setting realistic targets for specific areas of the Forest, both for now and the future. He had every confidence that Mr Marrable would produce a workable document by 1 February 2007 that could be developed over the years. Cllr Barnes could see no alternative to being admitted to HLS; the management plan would outline the generic objectives leaving achievement to subsequent work plans.
- 6.2.4 Mr Glyn reminded the Board that there would be an opportunity to opt out of HLS on 1 February 2007 and in five years time. Cllr Barnes outlined the consequences of opting out: Natural England (NE) would have to take other steps to reach the objectives. Defra were currently very eager that the Forest should remain in HLS.
- 6.2.5 Mr Gillham supported entry into HLS and agreed that Mr Marrable was the best person to negotiate the details. However, he was concerned that the Board would be committing to funding obligations ten years hence. Mr Glyn stated that Mr Marrable had gone into detailed costs to a considerable extent. His detailed mapping had enabled identification of work areas and Natural England would be well aware of the area of concern. It was agreed that interim reports would be required.
- 6.2.6 Mr Whetstone pointed out that if existing work was transferred into the HLS, the County Council could reduce its grant to the Board. The Clerk confirmed that the majority of the heathland conservation work had been carried out under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme which HLS replaced. In future, all heathland conservation work would be paid for by HLS, such as staff time (currently 90% of Mr Marrable's time and ca 40% of the field

staff time). The release of these salary costs would offset the costs of, for example, visitor management, communication, and education.

6.2.7 Cllr Barnes recognised that in the past the funding streams had been mixed. He would like to see a different form of accounting which would identify the various costs. It was agreed that the F&GP Committee would look at the consequences of admittance to HLS.

6.2.8 Mr Glyn proposed ratification of the HLS agreement. This was agreed.

6.2.9 **The Board agreed the Committee's recommendation 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.**

6.3 Forest Centre Development

6.3.1 The Minutes were amended to read as follows: "Whilst the Working Party supported the phase one development in principle (new Information Barn entrance, access and car park), it was agreed by FGP that the current priority should be on HLS."

6.3.2 Mr Cooper felt it important that the momentum of the project should be maintained. Cllr St Pierre agreed and suggested that the Clerk should continue to explore the planning issues in anticipation of successful funding.

6.3.3 Cllr Whetstone expressed his concern over the number of projects in hand. Cllr Barnes commented that he was happy with Stage One but the timing of some of the proposals, such as the relocation of a new boiler, may have to be slipped. However, he supported the Clerk in his research of modern wood fuel boilers.

6.3.4 **The Board agreed the Committee's recommendation that Stage One of 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.**

6.4 Staffing matters

6.4.1 The Clerk emphasised the urgent need for more "front line" support. He stated that management of the new income streams would be necessary as would the amenity, communications and information aspects of visitor management. Cllr Barnes supported temporary help in the short term but thought the Board should wait for a working party to review staffing requirements. Any job descriptions could wait until the review had taken place.

5.4.2 It was agreed that the Chairman would lead the working party. He invited Board members to put their names forward as soon as possible.

5.4.3 **The Board agreed the Committee's recommendation 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 permanent appointments are made.**

6.5 Legal Advice Cllr Barnes informed the Board that he had approached the Legal Department of East Sussex County Council to seek its advice. He had been told that the Department

could help with clarifying the impact of recent legislation on the Ashdown Forest Act 1974 but it would not be able to advise on the management of Value Added Tax.

- 5.6 Cats Protection The Clerk informed the Board that the wording of the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors' application form for the appointment/nomination of an arbitrator/independent expert had been agreed and sent to the RICS.
- 6.6 There being no further questions, Mr Parsons moved the adoption of the Minutes. This was agreed.

ITEM 7 To discuss ESCC proposal for a bridleway through Forest land from Pooh car park

- 7.1 The Clerk informed the Board that the designation of the new bridleway awaited the acceptance of the Board of a small addition to make access safer for horses approaching from Marsh Green. He circulated a plan showing the route following the current permissive path. The Board agreed to accept the proposed route.

ITEM 8 Any other business

- 8.1 The Chairman proposed that the Board open both Committee and Board meetings to allow the public to speak. Cllr Parsons informed the Board that Parish Council meetings allowed a statement from a member of the public to be read whilst Wealden District Council allowed ten minutes for questions. If the question was complex, a written answer would be given. The time allowed would be up to the discretion of the Chairman but it was suggested that ten minutes in total would be appropriate with firm control.
- 8.2 **The Board agreed in principle to the proposal that ten minutes should be allocated prior to a Committee or Board meeting for the public to raise questions.**

There being no other questions or comments, the meeting ended at 12.20.

Chairman _____
13 November 2006

Clerk _____