

# Inaugural meeting of the Parish Liaison Panel of the Board of Conservators of Ashdown Forest

1900, Wednesday 24 September 2008  
Ashdown Forest Centre

## Minutes

### 1) Welcome and introductions

Present on behalf of the *Board*: John Barnes (Chairman), Michael Cooper, Leslie Gillham, Philip Glyn, Hew Prendergast (Clerk), Francis Whetstone. Apologies: Rupert Thornely-Taylor. Sylvia Martin also attended.

Present on behalf of Parishes/Councils: *Buxted*, Louise Daniel; *Crowborough*, Sandra Timms; *Danehill*, Joan Lunn; *Forest Row*, Vivien Hill, Brian Killick; *Hartfield*, George Korbel, Tom Mitchell, Clair Park; *Maresfield*, Roger Street. Apologies: *Danehill*, Mike Wells.

Mr Barnes thanked everyone for coming.

### 2) Aim of the Panel

John Barnes expressed the Board's wish that the establishment of the Panel would enable it to maintain a dialogue with local parishes prior to major policy decisions and to facilitate communication about other issues of common interest. Roger Street commented that there were no other stakeholders or members of the public present. John Barnes replied by saying that parish representatives were a good start and that the Board's own meetings were open to the public and to their questions. Francis Whetstone added that the Panel was an opportunity for parish representatives to raise issues.

**After some discussion it was agreed that there would be an annual meeting, perhaps in December or January, that would be open to anyone, following the model of parish assemblies.** Through their councils Panel members would help publicise it.

**It was also agreed that the Panel itself would meet four times/year initially.** In future agenda items should be sent to Tracy Buxton (tracy@ashdownforest.org). There was support for Philip Glyn's suggestion that news might also be exchanged by email.

A number of issues were raised as asides. In response to Vivien Hill, John Barnes said concerns about the Forest should be addressed to the appropriate Ranger and to Hew Prendergast as Clerk. The latter agreed to describe their respective areas of responsibilities. [NB These are: North Chase - Forest Row, Colemans Hatch - Mike Yates; South Chase - Nutley, Duddleswell, Fairwarp - Roger Beal; East Chase - Chuck Hatch, Friars Gate, Mardens Hill - Chris Sutton; West Chase - Twyford, Birchgrove, Chelwood Gate - Rich Allum.]

Mr Mitchell said that youths in car parks at night were most troublesome, leaving litter behind. Hew Prendergast said that the removal of litter bins from the Forest four year ago had halved the amount of staff time needed to keep car parks litter-free. Several people noted that those inclined to throw litter around would do so however many litter bins might be present. Michael Cooper highlighted the critical role of volunteer rangers in picking up litter at weekends.

As background to the establishment of the Panel, Hew Prendergast described how the meetings held last year in local parishes arose out of the Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreement between the Board and Defra in 2006. These in turn helped shape the Strategic Forest Plan 2008-2016 that the Board signed off in June 2008. He emphasised that, far from working in isolation from the local community hitherto, the Board was already closely involved; in the case of dealing with deer casualties on roads, the work goes back some 20 years. The Ashdown Deer Group was formed in 2006, after a meeting at the Forest Centre, to bring local concerns and interests together with national expertise – this in turn leading to a deer warden scheme that is extending into other parts of the county. At the same time the Board was central to the formation of the Ashdown Forest Villages Road Safety Partnership involving six local parishes, Sussex Police, East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service and East Sussex County Council. It has held five Slow Down campaigns, the most recent this month.

As well as the ‘traditional’ round of talks locally – recently, for example, to the Nutley Conservation Group, Hartfield Historical Society and the newly formed Fairwarp Community Society - communications with both parishes and the local community generally have also expanded, in part due to HLS funding. A newsletter, Ashdown Forest Life, with a print-run of 5,000, is about to have its sixth issue published; the revamped website of the Board attracts 2,000 hits/month; and a new online news service was launched in August – already four parish clerks have subscribed. The establishment of this Panel is, therefore, the latest of the Board’s initiatives to maintain a high level of dialogue with the local community.

### **3) Winter work on the Forest**

Mr Barnes summarised some of the legal background to the management of the Forest over and above the Ashdown Forest Act 1974, for example its designation as a Site of Special Scientific Interest under UK legislation and as a Special Area for Conservation and Special Protection Area under EU legislation. He noted that by the end of the 1940s only about 10% of the Forest had been tree-covered but that this had since increased dramatically. The aim of the Board was to maintain a rough 60:40 ratio of heathland to woodland, an aim facilitated by HLS funding from Defra since 2006. Through mechanical management and grazing, the Board plans to restore the Forest’s heathland, in line with Defra’s Public Service Agreement of getting 90% of SSSIs into ‘favourable’ or ‘unfavourable recovering’ condition by 2010, as described by Philip Glyn. He also said he had photographs showing the ‘recovery’ of the land near Wrens Warren since the tree clearance work there in 2006/2007.

Mr Killick asked if the loss of tree cover on the Forest was the cause of increasing deer casualties on local roads. Hew Prendergast said that the main reason was the increasing number of deer. Tom Mitchell observed that there used to be no trees on the south side of the road near the Forest Centre.

Hew Prendergast gave a very brief resumé of why heathland had evolved on the Forest in contrast to much of the surrounding area. The key event was the demarcation of the Forest for deer hunting and the distinctive land-use ever since – for example its exploitation by commoners. Leslie Gillham described the changing use of the Forest by commoners, including the value they once put on bracken (for bedding livestock).

Maps showing where heathland restoration work was due this winter were available for comment. Hew Prendergast said that the only work underway so far was near Mardens Hill. This work was being done in-house. Contractors would be undertaking most of the rest and had until the end of

February 2009 to complete the job under normal circumstances. In answer to George Korbel, he said that contractors were expected to clear up afterwards.

#### **4) Topical issues of concern to the Board**

John Barnes, and then Michael Cooper, described the recent dealings of the Board with mountain bikers who wanted to open up the Forest to this activity. The Board had a duty to listen to their request even though past policy, reiterated most recently this year, has been to disallow it. Michael Cooper wondered at the view of the Panel and parishioners and said that, while local bikers may be responsible, those from elsewhere may not be.

Tom Mitchell suggested dedicating part of the Forest to biking, although it was recognised that this might lead to extensive wear and tear and the need to move areas of use from time to time. Roger Street recounted personal experience of bikes on the Forest passing him at speed and without warning, highlighting a safety issue. Leslie Gillham pointed out the difficulty of both policing and containment.

Although dogs, and their control and mess, were on the agenda (NB there have been attacks on sheep recently, resulting in several of the latter having to be put down), for want of time John Barnes moved on to a question of great concern to the Board, namely proposed housing developments and the South East Plan. He anticipated that parishes would also have concerns and might also be making representation, like the Board, to GOSE by 24 October.

#### **5) AOB**

After thanking everyone again, John Barnes closed the meeting at 2100.