

Minutes of the

ROADS, PLANNING & AMENITIES COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST

1430, Monday 6 February 2006

Ashdown Forest Centre

Members present: Mr F. Marshall (Chair), Mr R. Beal (Ranger), Mr F. Brown, Mr L. Gillham, Mr P. Glyn, Mr M. Lock, Mr R. Parsons, Dr H. Prendergast (Clerk), Mrs J. Wirdnam

Also present: Mr J. Barnes, Mr F. Whetstone

1) Planning issues

i) Access to the A275.

Mr Glyn had received from Ms Helen Ralston, Chief Executive of Cats Protection (CP), a response, dated 20 January 2006, to his letter of 18 November 2005. Mr Barnes had received a separate letter.

Mr Glyn summarised comments on CP's letter from Mr Tim Raikes who reiterated his recommendation settlement of the issue takes place through an arbitrator acting as an expert. CP's letter to Mr Glyn maintains that, in a letter from him of 21 September 2005, it was asked for agreement "to the principle of arbitration *or* the appointment of a mutually agreed expert". These two processes, it pointed out, were different. The Committee agreed that this was so and that a mistake had been made in the letter. Earlier correspondence (an email to CP of 7 August 2005 from Dr Prendergast on behalf of the Board was mentioned) has indicated that an arbitrator acting as an expert had long been the Board's set course. Mr Gillham suggested that an apology be made for the mistake and that it is still essential to establish the value of the access. He added that it may be in CP's interest to have this value established. On any uplift in value, Mr Glyn said that CP has steadfastly refused to accept that there was any now, only if there was further development, and Mr Barnes said that someone has to establish whether there is, or is not, any uplift in value; the process was aimed at establishing facts rather than the settlement.

Mr Lock said that the Board's stance of June has not changed but it easy to see how the wording of the letter of 21 September appeared to modify the letter of 15 June 2005. Both he and Mr Parsons pointed out how expensive arbitration can be.

The Committee agreed that determination of the issue should continue to be the use of an arbitrator acting as an expert.

ii) Forest Row Pavilion

Mr Parsons said that a planning application to introduce lighting to tennis courts had been refused. Dr Prendergast provided the Committee with a print-out on comments he had submitted to WDC about this application and others.

iii) Planning application comments

Dr Prendergast reported that he had still had no reply to questions he had posed to Mr Kay at Wealden District Council about why or how comments from the Forest were apparently being overlooked.

iv) Pooh Bridge.

Mr Marshall asked about progress on access of the new bridleway over the Pale by Pooh car park. Dr Prendergast explained that an engineering report he had just received shows that the same principle will be used as for the vehicular access into the new car park on private land, namely an infilling of any ditches rather than an excavation to cut away the Pale itself.

v) Dr Prendergast said that a planning application had been submitted to WDC in January for signage to the Centre and at Forest gateways.

2) Encroachments/bye-law breaches

Dr Prendergast reported that on 7 December 2005 the Centre was called with a report that a considerable amount of soil/subsoil was being dumped on the Forest on its boundary with Greenfields School, Priory Road. A picture was of a dumper in action and two Rangers visited the site immediately. These two Rangers wrote detailed statements of the incident as did a third Ranger who visited the site next morning. Meetings took place with staff from Greenfields School and the source of the spoil, the owners of Priors Hatch Farm, to agree to the clearing of this spoil – an estimated 60 tonnes of it – and this was achieved to the Rangers' satisfaction within a few days.

Forest staff spent a total of about 12 hours time on this incident, having to be pulled off other jobs. The scale and flagrancy of the breaches of the bye-laws are unprecedented in recent years. Greenfields School has already been involved in incidents in 2001 and 2003.

The County Solicitor, who was first contacted on 9 December, advised that, after the gathering of evidence from all parties, a decision could be made as to “whether there is sufficient evidence and whether it is in the public interest to prosecute”. The consensus among staff was that it would be better to focus court action on problems that have so far proved intractable.

After some discussion, that included mentioning the paltry £50 maximum fine imposable for Forest bye-law breaches, the Committee agreed that a letter should be sent to the two parties, detailing (where applicable) past transgressions and stating that any repeat would result in court action. It also suggested querying whether the two parties were in possession of appropriate permission for the moving of spoil.

Mr Lock informed the Committee that Government has made no provision for the disposal of landfill after 2008 and suggested contacting Mr Duncan Gordon who is advising ESCC on waste disposal.

Dr Prendergast added that staff are greatly concerned about the continuing abuse of Forest bye-laws by riders without permits. Over the previous weekend, of the twelve riders stopped by the duty Ranger, only one had a permit.

3) Forest Centre development – update on the work of Ian Parkin (Parkin Heritage and Tourism)

On 11 January Ian Parkin and a colleague made a presentation, incorporating draft architectural designs for the look of the future Centre, to about 25 consultees on his latest thinking. While still drafting the final report, he has already made a strong recommendation that change in the running of the Centre should begin this summer,

especially with the hiring of a Visitor Services Manager to run the Information Barn, do all the ordering, placing and counting of stock, train volunteers in the use of a cash till, and keep the building open all day in the week. The combination of the above, along with more stock to sell, the installation of drink vending machines and improved signage to the Centre, should greatly increase visitor spend at the Centre. Mr Parkin will make his presentation to the Board on Thursday 16 March.

Mr Marshall said that the recommendations already being made by Mr Parkin “have been our dreams” and now it was time to start making decisions. The Board, he continued, must think seriously about what has been taking place. Mr Glyn said that pivotal to the future would be increased visitor numbers to the Centre. The appointment of a suitably professional Visitor Services Manager (or some such person) would have the added benefit of taking work away from Mrs Ros Marriott. Mr Parsons said that the development of the Centre would eclipse other matters that have come before the Board. He suggested that any change this summer could be viewed as a project within a project, that it could be financed from reserves, and that the time is already close for the recruitment process to start. He further suggested that experience gleaned from this summer would be invaluable, a view echoed by Mr White who added that visitors would need to be told about, for example, the presence of vending machines. Mrs Wirdnam suggested an increased use of volunteers to take over some of the tasks done by Ros Marriott. Mr Whetstone said that he felt uninformed about progress so far.

Finally, the Committee agreed that options for this summer should be discussed at Board level, not through the Urgency Committee.

4) Ashdown Forest Villages Road Safety Partnership – a new initiative

Dr Prendergast reported that this group was set up in May 2005 at the instigation of Keith Sinden, ESCC Principal Road Safety Officer, and involves all six Forest parishes and the Conservators. The aim is to reduce the number of human and livestock casualties through encouraging slower traffic speed across Forest roads (bar the A22). Building on a protocol developed elsewhere in the county, a flier has been designed that asks drivers to commit to driving slower on Forest roads. This will be backed up with the installation of Speed Indicator Displays (SIDs), manned by volunteers, along the B2026 and the C2. Volunteers will be trained in March and the Partnership launched officially in May.

Although Mr Whetstone said he had a somewhat jaundiced view of initiatives such as these, other members felt that the initiative can only do good, but must ultimately be backed up by the Police.

5) Memorial benches – latest design

A new, cheaper design by High Weald Furniture was shown to the Committee. Ex VAT costs are £685.00/bench, including the routing of “Ashdown Forest” on the backrest, £50.00 for a plaque with any lettering required, and £55.00 for a metal (chain-saw resistant) bar up each leg, making a total of £790.00 (£928.0 incl. VAT). There are now 13 expressions of interest in having a memorial bench on the Forest.

The Committee recommended a fee of £2,500/bench for the first ten. It was thought this figure would be high enough to cover costs, provide an income and prevent an avalanche of requests that could not be catered for. Any ‘redundant’ plaques, from benches that have had to be removed, should be kept at the Centre

6) *Ashdown Forest Life* [?] – briefing on a new newsletter for the Board funded by the Friends

Dr Prendergast reported that since July 2005 he has been discussing and developing with the Friends the idea of a newsletter (perhaps with the above title) for the Board. Its main aims would be to promote the work and profile of the Board and help increase membership of the Friends. Current thinking is for an issue to appear for each season. Mr Gillham said it was important to convey the Board's messages in a balanced way. The Committee welcomed the initiative.

7) Offer to purchase land from the Board at Jessop's Hill, Bell Lane, Nutley

Dr Prendergast said that this odd piece of land, nearly a kilometre away from any other part of the Forest, was incorporated into the Forest in two stages: the westerly one as part of the estate of Lord Gage in 1982 (strictly speaking it is in the ownership of the Board), the easterly one as manorial waste from ESCC in 1997 (in the ownership, therefore, of the Ashdown Forest Trust). It has become clear that the eastern boundary of the waste is uncertain so staff have been investigating with ESCC and Land Registry to clarify where it is. Its importance lies in the access it offers to a field behind it that is for sale. A prospective purchaser has asked about the ownership of Jessops and made an offer for all of it, irrespective, it seems, of the outcome of establishing who owns the access. Dr Prendergast suggested that the offer was too small.

Under the 1974 Act, the Board may sell land outside the Forest. In 1999, Mr Andrew Ogden, Deputy County Secretary at the time, wrote that he did not believe that the Council would "have any objection to the Conservators disposing of" the land.

The Committee agreed to turn down the offer and to await results of further investigations. Mr Barnes suggested that, if possible, the land of uncertain ownership be claimed for the Board and that, in the short term, a lease for access across it could be considered and that, if sold, the funds come to the Board.

8) AOB

Mr White asked about the Board's policy on the number of accesses permitted to properties across Forest land. The response was that, in order to prevent more of the Forest going under tracks and roadways, properties have one access only. Mr Radford-Kirby said that a wholly transparent policy that takes into account all eventualities may not always be useful and may take a very long time to devise. The Committee acknowledged that it had already been agreed that there should be a thorough review of all matters connected to access to properties across Forest land.

Mr Marshall wondered if the appropriate wayleaves had been obtained for new or replacement BT poles from Chuck Hatch to Wrens Warren. Dr Prendergast said he would look into it.

The meeting finished at 1730.