

# Strategic Plan for Ashdown Forest (2013-2016)

## 6 Month Review October 2014 – March 2015

A site of local and international importance



**The Conservators of Ashdown Forest**

**The Ashdown Forest Centre**

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Ashdown Forest is a site of local and international importance lying within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and comprises some 2,500 ha of Common Land.

The ecological significance of Ashdown Forest is reflected by its designation as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), as a Special Protection Area (SPA) for birds, and as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for its heathland habitats. It is part of the European Natura 2000 network as it hosts some of Europe's most threatened species and habitats.

*"Nothing can exceed the picturesque beauty of certain portions of this district, eminences clothed with heather and gorse, and crowned with Scotch fir and holly, enclosed valleys intersected by clear running brooks, whose course, here rapid and noisy, rushes over rocks and ridges of sandstone." A.E. Knox*

## **Introduction**

This review of our Strategic Plan sets out the goals and objectives the Conservators have set for themselves and progress with each of these. Key successes this year include:

- A lively programme of events including many school visits, organised walks, dog training, exhibitions and others.
- Further development of the grazing programme with new stock, new grazing areas and the acquisition of a base at Hillsdown Farm.
- The production of an Enforcement Policy soon to be issued formally.
- Putting in place a range of personnel, health and safety and management policies to give clarity to the way we operate.
- Obtaining planning permission for a rejuvenated Forest Centre.

The big tasks ahead are:

- To increase the amount of heathland in favourable condition and extend the grazing programme based on sound research.
- To set out a plan to raise funding for the new Forest Centre and put it in to practice.
- To build on and extend our 'in house' Education programme through our new two year education project.
- Work with Natural England to get the best funding deal we can when the Higher Level Stewardship scheme is replaced.

The challenges involved in these tasks are considerable. I am grateful for the efforts of staff, volunteers, the Friends and Board members for their help in making progress this year and look forward to their continuing support.

**Roy Galley - Chairman of the Board of Conservators**

## Context

Originally a deer hunting forest, Ashdown Forest is now one of the largest free public access spaces in the South East.

The responsibility for managing Ashdown Forest on behalf of the Owner, who since 1988 has been the Ashdown Forest Charitable Trust, lies with an independent body, the Board of Conservators of Ashdown Forest.

The Board, created in 1885, has been regulated under a series of Acts of Parliament, the most recent being the Ashdown Forest Act 1974. There, in section 16, it is stated that: "*It shall be the duty of the Conservators at all times as far as possible to regulate and manage the forest as an amenity and place of resort subject to the existing rights of common upon the forest and to protect such rights of common, to protect the forest from encroachments, and to conserve it as a quiet and natural area of outstanding beauty*". Membership of the Board is also laid out in this Act. Eight members are appointed by East Sussex County Council, two are appointed by Wealden District Council, five are elected by local commoners and one (the Chairman of the County Council) representing the Ashdown Forest Trust as Lord of the Manor of Duddleswell. The County Council is the sole Trustee of the Charity with any decisions concerning the Trust referred to the County Council Cabinet.

Subsequent legislation that affects the management of the Forest includes The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended), the 1992 EC Habitats Directive, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW) 2000, the Commons Act 2006, The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (NERC) 2006, the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 and The Conservation of Habitats and Species (Amendment) Regulations 2012.. This extensive legislation relates mostly to protection of wildlife but also to the duties of local authorities regarding biodiversity and to the status of Common Land in the modern age.



## Objective of the Board of Conservators

To manage the Forest on behalf of the Ashdown Forest Trust under the terms of the Ashdown Forest Act 1974, the Ashdown Forest Trust Deed and subsequent legislation.



## CONSERVATION:

Strategic Priority: Management of lowland heathland : Lead Officer – Conservation Officer			
Goals	Strategies	Elements to measure	Progress -6 mth review Oct 14-March 15
<p>Fulfil HLS requirements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintain extent of heathland ensuring its management retains highest priority</li> <li>Achieve Natural England (NE) defined Favourable Condition for all heathland</li> <li>Halt overall biodiversity loss</li> </ul>	<p>Manage heathland in accordance with Management Planning schedule</p> <p>Review Management Planning schedule according to NE monitoring</p> <p>Evaluate role of grazing in achieving NE Favourable Condition</p> <p>Liaise with NE &amp; EA over Natura 2000 Site Improvement Plan</p> <p>Work within Defra’s Biodiversity 2020 Strategy</p> <p>Identify and evaluate threats</p>	<p>Extent of heathland</p> <p>Extent of heathland meeting Natural England’s Favourable Condition Tables (FCTs)</p> <p>Populations of SAC and SPA notification and other species</p> <p>Threats and responses</p>	<p>No known decrease in extent during this period</p> <p>The assessment carried out this summer showed an increase in the number of units achieving favourable status</p> <p>Birds monitored by Ashdown Bird Group; other notable species monitored by Rangers/CO. A good year for Dartford warblers and nightjars.</p> <p>Our input was included in a submission by NE</p> <p>All our HLS work complies with Defra’s Biodiversity 2020 Strategy</p> <p>Threats dealt with as they arise, eg planning applications, pollution incidents. Long-term nitrogen monitoring under way</p>

<b>Strategic Priority: Maintenance of key species data : Lead Officer – Conservation Officer</b>			
<b>Goals</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Elements to measure</b>	<b>Progress -6 mth review Oct 14-March 15</b>
An up to date comprehensive species database for the Forest	<p>Define key species</p> <p>Regular monitoring of species in accordance with protocols</p> <p>Regular detailed Forest vegetation mapping</p> <p>Liaise with Local Records Centres and specialist groups e.g. Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre, Ashdown Forest Bird Group</p>	<p>Number/s of key species</p> <p>Extent of relevant habitats</p>	<p>Defined in SPA/SAC and SSSI notification documents</p> <p>This is carried out by staff and volunteers</p> <p>New vegetation mapping being undertaken by consultants as part of Wealden N monitoring contract</p> <p>Ongoing</p>

<b>Strategic Priority: Management of Woodland : Lead Officer – Conservation Officer</b>			
<b>Goals</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Elements to measure</b>	<b>Progress -6 mth review Oct 14-March 15</b>
<p>Ghyll woodland biodiversity maintained</p> <p>Secondary woodland of improved ecological, amenity and financial value</p> <p>No hazards from woodland, boundary or roadside trees</p>	<p>Work towards ESUS Woodland Management Plan as funds allow</p> <p>Monitor sources of funding for and income from woodland management and submit applications</p> <p>Eliminate non-native invasive species, e.g. Rhododendron (ponticum)</p>	<p>Funds received/ wood permits issued</p> <p>Fuel prices</p> <p>Non-native invasive species</p>	<p>Ongoing. 110 wood permits issued by March 2015.</p> <p>The majority of woodland work is on hold until the start of NELMS. Alder carr was coppiced this year</p> <p>Regular hazardous tree surveys carried out</p> <p>We have an ongoing programme of invasive species control across the Forest</p>

A viable deer management programme	Work with The Deer Initiative		A trial cull is underway for winter 2014/15
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**Strategic Priority: Management of the Historic Environment: Lead Officer – Conservation Officer**

Goals	Strategies	Elements to measure	Progress -6 mth review Oct 14-March 15
Increased knowledge of archaeological features/sites	Continuing recording of above ground archaeology	Number and condition of recorded sites	New information provided by the Estate team is passed on to the County Archaeologist
Known sites protected in line with County Architect /English Heritage recommendations	Support Volunteers' efforts	Volunteer resource working on archaeology	No currently active volunteers
An accessible and up to date catalogue	Maintenance of archaeology and protection of all sites	Damage to sites	All known sites are protected from damage by management

**Strategic Priority: Future Funding for Heathland Management : Lead Officer – Conservation Officer**

Goals	Strategies	Elements to measure	Progress -6 mth review Oct 14-March 15
Identify post-Higher Level Stewardship funding opportunities	Liaise with NE Panel Monitor Government and EU output	Applications made and funding awarded	NE panel does not currently meet. Working closely with NE staff. Funding bid to be submitted summer 2015

<b>Strategic Priority: Understand implication to Forest of the Local Authorities Strategic Access and Monitoring Strategy (SAMMS); Lead Officer – Director</b>			
<b>Goals</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Elements to measure</b>	<b>Progress -6 mth review Oct 14-March 15</b>
Implement projects proposed by Ashdown Forest and approved by Local Authorities	'Every Dog Matters' Programme Bird Monitoring Education and Information Programme Visitor Management and monitoring	As per individual project proposals	Interim funding of 10k agreed by WDC to support Every Dog Matters programme – Code of Conduct production and Car Park signage. Ongoing discussions with Local Authorities as to long term funding.

**References include:** Caroline Fitzgerald, 'The Future of Grazing 2013; Natural England, Favourable Condition Tables Ashdown Forest SSSI; Chris Marrable, Management Planning for Ashdown Forest Lowland Heathland 2012; NE, EA, Improvement Programme for England's Natura 2000 sites; Defra , Biodiversity 2020; Chris Butler, Archaeology on Ashdown Forest 2010-2012; East Sussex County Council Scheduled Monument Record; SBRC Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre; Biological Records Centre, Oxford; National Dormouse Monitoring; AFBG Ashdown Forest Bird Group; JNCC Common Standards Monitoring; ESUS Woodland Plan 2008; Draft Local Authorities Strategic Access Management & Monitoring Survey (SAMMS); Ashdown Forest Mitigation Projects.

## ROADS, PLANNING AND AMENITY:

Strategic Priority: To protect the Forest from encroachment and misuse; Lead Officer - Clerk			
Goals	Strategies	Elements to measure	Progress -6 mth review Oct 14-March 15
Effective enforcement of the bye-laws and in so doing reduce the number of encroachments and speed up their resolution	<p>Apply an increase in fines from £50 to up to the statutory limit</p> <p>Create and implement a process for escalation, including Court action</p>	<p>Number of breaches</p> <p>Numbers of repeat offences</p> <p>Number of prosecutions</p> <p>Number of resolutions</p> <p>Time from breach report to resolution</p>	<p>Consultation undertaken – awaiting formal approval from DERA. Enforcement Policy is 'live' – however, awaiting flow chart for unfenced land from ESCC.</p> <p>2 new encroachments</p> <p>2 ongoing</p> <p>1 encroachment resolved</p> <p>1 bye-law breach court case – resolved</p>
Effectively regulate commercial and other activities	<p>Record evidence on Property Files of un-authorized changes, including via photographic and boundary walking</p> <p>Create programme of publicity in relation to charges, fees and licences required for use of Forest</p>	<p>Numbers of licences issued</p> <p>Numbers of permits issued</p>	<p>Annual Boundary Walking Report to be presented to April 15 RPA.</p> <p>Fees and Charges on Website</p> <p>1 Model aeroplane licence</p> <p>5 Perpetual Licences</p> <p>5 Deeds of Covenant</p> <p>1 Hunt licence</p> <p>1 Nordic Walking licence</p> <p>1 Filming permit</p> <p>99 Wood permits</p> <p>27 Winter riding permits</p> <p>Annual letter sent to all Commoners and Licence Holders.</p>



To ensure timely and appropriate comments on any planning application affecting the Forest	Respond in the required timescales	Number of planning applications % of applications responded to within accepted timescale	3 – see RPA 02/15  100% responded in time
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<b>Strategic Priority: To promote understanding of the Forest as an amenity and to ensure effective Visitor Management; Lead Officer - Director</b>			
<b>Goals</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Elements to measure</b>	<b>Progress -6 mth review Oct 14-March 15</b>
Promote understanding of the Forest as a historic managed landscape and a site of scientific importance	Develop Communication Plan for internal resources (website, printed literature, e-service) and external (event, exhibition and programme management)	Communication Plan in place by March 2014	Communication Plan agreed at Board June 2014. Communication Plan in place: individual plans in place for Invisible Fencing, Summer Grazing and Code of Conduct. Website hits: 25,755; Blog hits: 7688; Facebook friends: 1234; Twitter followers: 2671; E news: 1009
Promote understanding of heathland conservation and management	Build Programme of Relationship management – Commoners, Friends, Residents, Volunteers, Parish Councils, local groups and organisations	Number of events / activities / meetings/forums put on, directly and indirectly. Number of participants attending	2 Parish Liaison Panels (6 Parishes); 2 Volunteer Networks (80 attendees); 3 Presentations; 2 Tourism Association meetings; 1 dog Walkers Forum; 2 Ashdown Forest Riding Associations meetings.
Develop a Visitor Management Strategy including promoting the Forest Centre as a facility that will increase the footfall from existing Forest visitors	Consider re-engagement with specialists in visitor management	Visitor Management Strategy developed by March 2015  Visitor experience feedback	No progress to date.  Comments Book and Suggestion

		<p>Increased number of visitors to Forest Centre, others TBA as part of the Strategy Feedback from stakeholders &amp; numbers of volunteers recruited, trained and retained</p> <p>Feedback from Ashdown Forest Tourism Association</p>	<p>Box in place</p> <p>Visitors to Information Barn (Winter opening): 2450; Volunteer Hours: 921.5 (= £9215); Volunteer Training: 2 events held (Manual Handling/1<sup>st</sup> Aid) Volunteers: 114</p> <p>Bye-law briefing given to AFTA members.</p>
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**Strategic Priority: To promote understanding of the Forest as an amenity and to ensure effective Visitor Management; Lead Officer - Director**

Goals	Strategies	Elements to measure	Progress -6 mth review Oct 14-March 15
Support the Society of Friends to increase their Membership and contribution	<p>Grant request process</p> <p>Regular programme of meetings and sharing of Objectives</p>	Funding requests presented and agreed	Grant for Education Project offered and accepted. 3 Friends Liaison meetings and 1 AGM. Joint programme of events being developed for 2015.

**Strategic Priority: To develop the Ashdown Forest in-house education and Community offer; Lead Officer: Director**

Goals	Strategies	Elements to measure	Progress -6 mth review Oct 14-March 15
Extend education and community programme for schools, adults, 'special' interest groups and local communities	<p>Work with Local Authorities Strategic Access Management and Monitoring Strategy (SAMMS)</p> <p>Funding strategy</p>	<p>Why they do not take up our education offer</p> <p>Number of volunteers recruited, supported and retained</p>	Seven Mitigation proposals continue to be considered for funding by Local Authorities. 10k Discretionary Payment received from Wealden District Council towards Every Dog Matters Code of Conduct publicity,

<p>Extend partnerships, building on the successful working with the Probation Service and East Sussex County Council (South View Close)</p>	<p>Partnership with Sussex Wildlife Trust (SWT) and other relevant organisations</p> <p>Forest School Strategy</p> <p>Volunteer Policy</p> <p>Partnership with Probation Service and other relevant organisations</p>	<p>Feedback from partners</p> <p>Measure value of work undertaken</p> <p>Numbers of organisations engaged</p>	<p>promotion and signage.</p> <p>Education Programme transferred from SWT September 2014: 300 children befitted during this period. Positive feedback received from schools.</p> <p>Feedback survey for partners/stakeholder to be developed for 2015.</p> <p>South View Close continues to work with us on a weekly basis. Contract put in place with Probation Service for targeted work tasks.</p>
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<b>Strategic Priority: To develop the Ashdown Forest in-house education and Community offer; Lead Officer: Director</b>			
<b>Goals</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Elements to measure</b>	<b>Progress -6 mth review Oct 14-March 15</b>
Acquire land, when it becomes available, within the Ancient pale no longer in the ownership of the Trust	Relationship with Landowners and Friends	Acres/hectares acquired	Ongoing

**References include:**

Ashdown Forest Act 1974; Ashdown Forest Bye-Laws; SAMMS; Higher Level Stewardship; Volunteer Policy; Conservation Committee Objectives.

## FOREST CENTRE DEVELOPMENT:

<b>Strategic Priority: To produce a Forest Centre development project plan; Lead Officer: Director</b>			
<b>Goals</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Elements to measure</b>	<b>Progress -6 mth review Oct 14-March 15</b>
Achieve a fully developed and refurbished Forest Centre	Forest Centre Project agreed by Board and structures to implement in place.	Project development milestones reached. Approval of planning consent x2	Planning Permission and Pre Planning Conditions met October 14.
Identify and cost all pre. formal fundraising activities	Work within delegated budget of £20,000	Funding strategy in place and implemented	Planning Application (1) activated with funding for, and installation of Solar Panels October 14. Feed-in-Tariff (FIT) application accepted by Ofgem January 2015.
Achieve planning and building regulation consent for the Operational Site and Forest Centre	Commission appropriate professionals including, in the first instance, Quantity Surveyors and Architects.		Funding received from AFCT to match Low Carbon Workspaces Grant to undertake insulation and glazing work in Education barn
Devise a funding strategy and appropriate bodies to conduct it	Relationship management with supporters, funding bodies, partners and local communities.  Relationship management with landowners and Society of Friends		Professional Advice sought re Fund raising options. Board considers options march 2015. Planning Application (2) for Operational area submitted December 2014.

### References include:

Standing Orders and Financial Regulations; Roads, Planning and Amenities Committee objectives; Finance and General Purposes Committee objectives.

## FINANCE AND GENERAL PURPOSE:

<b>Strategic Priority: Financial Management and Reporting; Lead Officer - Responsible Financial Officer / Director</b>			
<b>Goals</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Elements to measure</b>	<b>Progress -6 mth review Oct 14-March 15</b>
Ensure fiscal discipline	Ensure Financial Regulations are adhered to	Satisfactory Audit	Satisfactory Audits. Statement of Accounts filed.
Improved quality and clarity of financial reporting	Implement new reporting structures in the financial year 13/14	Monitoring of new sources of funding	New reporting structure implemented with recognised time savings. In addition this is extended to HLS.
Improve control and flexibility of budget setting	Review use of external contractors Review budgeting process	Time needed to produce quarterly and year end reports Costs and hours	2015/16 Committee cycle aligned to budget setting cycle ensuring appropriate oversight.
Produce a full Annual Report			2013/14 Annual Report produced
Continuously explore funding options and provide support to individual committees	Organisational Funding Strategy	Fewer variances	No overall Funding Strategy. Ad hoc and specific funding opportunities sourced.
Maintain key finance related relationships including East Sussex County Council, Wealden District Council, Natural England and others	Relationship management in place and implemented	Partner feedback	Regular formal meetings with ESCC, WDC and NE – all actively supportive and recommendations for grant levels to be maintained.

<b>Strategic Priority: Governance; Lead Officer: Responsible Financial Officer / Director</b>			
<b>Goals</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Elements to measure</b>	<b>Progress -6 mth review Oct 14-March 15</b>
Create an organisational library to provide clear evidence of status including land ownership, trust deed and legal status	Identify defining documents and collate securely physically and electronically	Documents in place and any gaps identified. Compliance	To be reviewed
Maintain appropriate and up to date Standing Orders and ensure compliance	Annual review of Standing Orders, including setting rates for permits, licences, the Forest Rate and all fees	Annual reviews	Annual review undertaken
Have all organisational policies in place	Timetable of monitoring and review in place	Review as appropriate	Policies agreed in the last year: -Disciplinary Policy -Lone Working Policy -Pensions Discretions Policy -Recruitment and Selection of Employees
Ensure a consistent reporting style to Board and Committees	Templates and toolkits	Compliance	
Maintain appropriate and up to date risk management toolkit	Timetable of monitoring and review in place		NFU led Health and Safety Assessment carried out, report received; Action Plan developed around recommendations

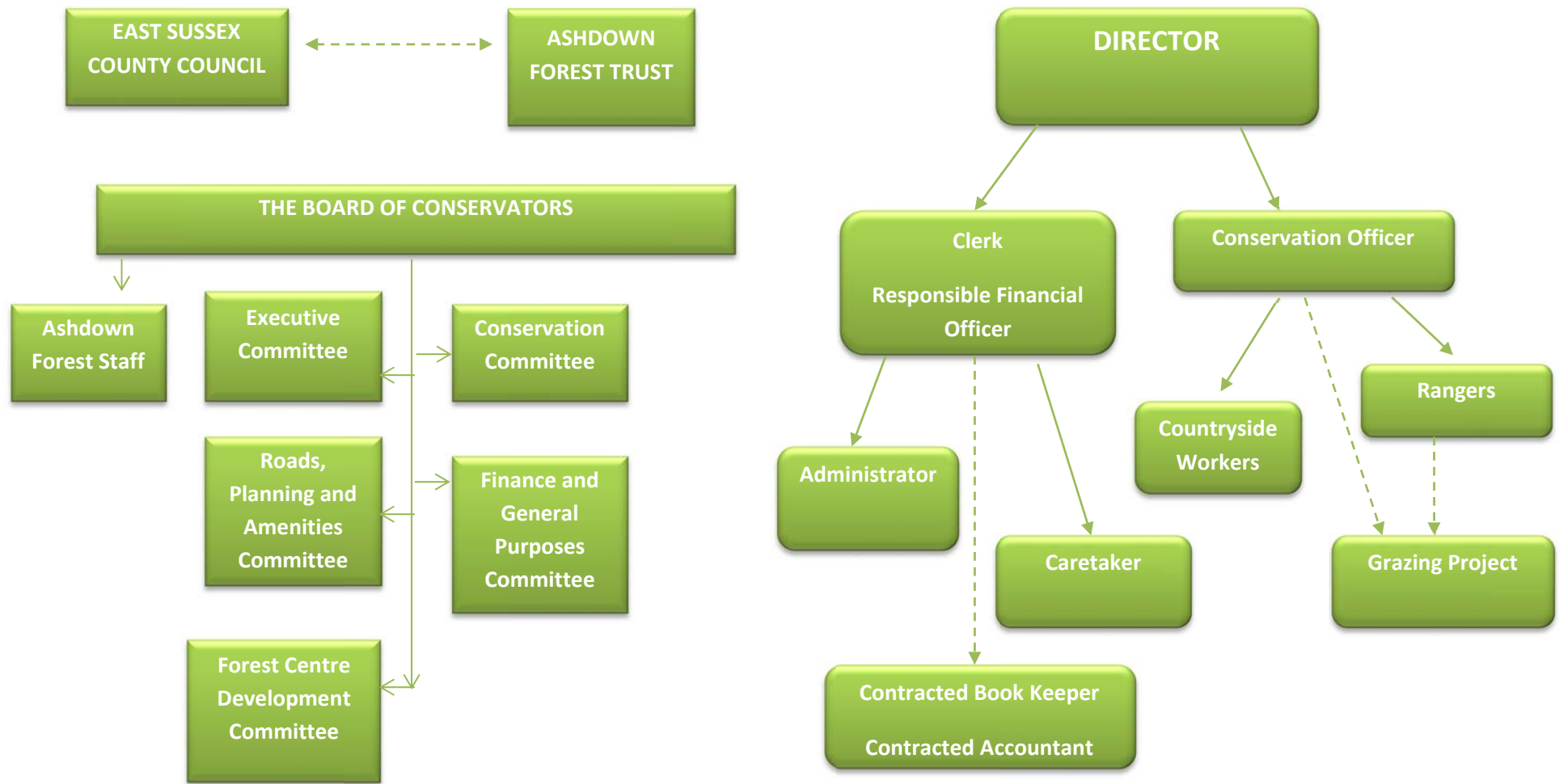
<b>Strategic Priority: Human Resources; Lead Officer - Director</b>			
<b>Goals</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Elements to measure</b>	<b>Progress -6 mth review Oct 14-March 15</b>
Ensure a well-motivated and effective staff.	Appraisal Process (annual and six month reviews)	Appraisal paperwork	All appraisals undertaken.
	Training and Development Plan	Organisational and individual training undertaken	Training and development Plan in place
Ensure a well-motivated volunteer team	Staff and volunteer satisfaction survey	Feedback from staff and	Feedback obtained regularly on an informal basis.

	<p>Review organisational structure and resources</p> <p>Succession Planning</p>	<p>volunteers</p> <p>Feedback from partners on organisational effectiveness</p>	<p>Informal feedback received from partners; other options (eg Survey Monkey) being investigated.</p> <p>F and GP sub group actively considering all future options.</p>
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<b>Strategic Priority: Maintaining and managing organisational infrastructure; Lead Officer - Director</b>			
<b>Goals</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Elements to measure</b>	<b>Progress -6 mth review Oct 14-March 15</b>
<p>Have an effective IT system in place</p> <p>Manage the Forest Centre site (to its full potential) within budget</p> <p>Organisational document management</p>	<p>Risk Assessments</p> <p>Business Continuity Plan</p> <p>Annual scrutiny of maintenance and utility contracts.</p>	<p>Annual review</p> <p>Best value</p>	<p>Overhaul undertaken to provide greater security, efficiency and support.</p> <p>No progress</p> <p>To be reviewed Baseline identified – to be progressed</p>

**References include:**

Forest Centre Development Committee objectives.





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Caroline FitzGerald

Grazing Assistant  
Joe Wallis

Caretaker  
John Ridley

## Rangers

Rich Allum	South Chase
Mike Payne	West Chase
Chris Sutton	East Chase
Mike Yates	North Chase

## Countryside Workers

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