

**Minutes of the  
FINANCE & REGULATORY COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE  
BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST**

**Monday 31 October 2022**

14:00 at the Ashdown Forest Centre

Committee members present: Mr C de Mestre (Chair via MS Teams), Mr AG Reid, Mr R Stogdon, Cllr P Pragnell, Ms F Thomas and Mr N Goldie-Scott

*Ex-Officio:* Mrs R St. Pierre

Also present: Mr J Adler (CEO), Mr C Ball (Finance Officer) and Mrs K Dirs (Business Manager),

Minutes taken by the Business Manager

		<b>Action</b>
<b>22/22</b>	<p><b>Apologies</b> There were no apologies. Cllr Lunn did not attend.</p>	
<b>23/22</b>	<p><b>Declarations of interest by Members of a Personal or Prejudicial Nature</b> Mr de Mestre declared he is a commoner grazier and receives the BPS payment</p>	
<b>24/22</b>	<p><b>Matters Arising</b> The CEO reported the conclusion of the external audit and that a qualification had been filed relating to a technical breach for the exercise of public rights. The organisation had asserted that the public rights had been published by the 01 July deadline, when in fact they were published 10 days later. This refers to the year 2020/2021.  The CEO advised of ongoing research into an alternative ethical pension provision.</p>	
<b>25/22</b>	<p><b>Finance</b> <i>25.01/22 To recommend the draft 2023/2024 budget &amp; commentary for approval by the Board</i> The Finance Officer (FO) provided an overview of the budget headlines advising that budgeting in uncertain economic times poses challenges. The forecast budget deficit of 203k is made up of Core 132k and Countryside Stewardship (CS) 71k.  The total budget deficit of 115K includes a Core surplus of 25k and a CS deficit of 140k. The Core surplus is driven by parking payment revenues which are anticipated to result in a material revenue stream for the Forest with the CS deficit relating to land management funded by CS reserves.  The salary costs of the organisation represent the single highest expense to the Conservators and, as they are directly connected with the NJC pay scales and the ESCC pension scheme, an increase in salaried expenses of 31.7k in the current year has been forecast with a further increase of 32.2k using an estimated settlement of 5% for 2023-24. These costs are outside the organisation's control.  The FO advised a more realistic figure for tree safety management needed to be considered and the costs for a new grazing contractor had been included for 2023/2024.  Mr Reid questioned the reliability of the CS grant payments and asked if the next payment was expected to be paid on time. The CEO advised there was no reason to assume the</p>	

	<p>payment would be delayed but there was uncertainty over funding post 2025 at the end of the CS agreement.</p> <p><b>The Committee reviewed the draft 2023/2024 budget and agreed to recommend to the Board for approval.</b></p> <p><i>25.02/22 To review the Mid Term Financial Plan (MTFP)</i> The FO gave an overview of the MTFP.</p> <p><i>25.03/22 To review the 2022/2023 Q2 finance summary</i> The FO provided a summary of the Q2 YTD actuals against the combined CS and Core budget. The forecast budget was 82k vs actual YTD 20k with Core in deficit of 95k and CS in surplus of 75k. The FO explained that this gap was expected to narrow due to CS contract works being undertaken primarily in the second half of the year and the introduction of car parking payments increasing the revenues in Core. The FO explained the most significant movements in the balance sheet remain the changes in accrued income and cash and deposits on hand due to the use of deposits to fund the day-to-day activities pending receipts. In addition there has been no adjustment in respect of Rents and Rates outstanding since technically the organisation only recognises payments on receipt. Revenue from the refreshment vendors is also down. Deposits in hand consist primarily of riding permits.</p> <p><i>25.04/22 To note implementation of the annual pay rise (TBD)</i> The CEO explained the Unions were considering a pay rise of £1,925 to all scales and a 4.04% increase to allowances, equating to approximately a 10% rise for the lowest paid staff and 4% for the highest paid. The rise will be backdated to 1 April 2022. As part of the offer, all employees would also receive an extra day of annual leave entitlement from 01 April 2023. A response to the offer is anticipated shortly.</p> <p><i>*Post meeting note: The pay settlement outlined above has now been finalised.</i></p> <p><i>25.05/22 To agree the Forest Rate for 2023/2024</i> The Business Manager highlighted the formula adopted by the Board In 2017 for the increase in the Forest Rate, using CPI+1% or 5%, whichever is greater. The CPI for September 2022 was 8.8 (+1%) so 9.8% is greater. The increase of 9.8% will generate an additional 2.9k revenue. The majority of Commoners fall within Rate Category 1 which represents an increase of £2.64.</p> <p><b>The Committee reviewed the Forest Rate for 2023/2024 and agreed to recommend to the Board for approval.</b></p> <p><i>25.06/22 To agree the Fees and Charges for 2023/2024</i> The Business Manager spoke to her paper and explained the proposed increase in fees and charges for 2023/2024 of 5% are in line with the Consumer Price Index for Recreation and Culture for September 2022 which was 5.3.</p> <p><b>The Committee reviewed the Fees &amp; Charges for 2023/2024 and agreed to recommend to the Board for approval.</b></p>	
26/22	<p><b>Forest Amenity</b></p> <p><i>26.01/22 Parking Payments implementation – verbal update</i> The CEO confirmed that parking payments were being implemented on Monday 21 November. Final contract negotiations are in progress and signage is being installed. Staff and volunteer training will take place in the following weeks. The CEO explained by adopting the 75:25 shared revenue option the financial risk element to the Conservators</p>	

	<p>has been negated as the Conservators will only be liable for the variable costs associated with the project.</p> <p><i>26.02/22 To consider temporary storage for Fairwarp Village Fete</i></p> <p>The Committee considered a comprehensive report submitted by Mr Telford and Ms Till of the Fairwarp Fete and Village Hall Committee. The report explained that the committee members were struggling to transfer the fete equipment to the green given its weight and bulk and a van was now needed to transfer the equipment. The Village Hall Committee believes that placing a shipping container on the Green would resolve the need for multiple journeys to and from the Hall and a number of other issues in relation to the equipment storage.</p> <p>The Business Manager advised Fairwarp village green is part of the SSSI and Natural England consent will be needed prior to an application for planning consent.</p> <p><b>The Committee unanimously supported the proposal to permit the siting of a storage container on Fords Green and agreed to recommend to the Board for approval.</b></p>	
<b>27/22</b>	<b>Breach of Bye-law issues and encroachments</b>	
	The Business Manger advised a fencing encroachment at Lintons House had been restored to the original boundary line.	
<b>28/22</b>	<b>Licences, Permits, Rates and Wayleaves</b>	
	There has been a 20% decline in the number of riding permits issued, with 255 issued YTD compared to 315 in 2021/2022. 13 commercial dog walking permits have been issued which is static compared to 2021/2022.	
<b>29/22</b>	<b>Employment &amp; Staffing Arrangements</b>	
	<p>The CEO proposed the pay date for employees be changed to the 22<sup>nd</sup> of the month. It is currently the fourth Friday of the month but this can have repercussions for staff as the variance means there can be five weeks between pay dates. As this is an employee contractual matter, a mini consultation is required to move the date. <b>ACTION: JA</b></p> <p><i>*Post meeting note: This mini consultation has been launched.</i></p> <p>A Hardship Loan is being considered for staff who may struggle with the rising cost of living. The Finance Officer will prepare terms. <b>ACTION: CB</b></p>	<p><b>JA</b></p> <p><b>CB</b></p>
<b>30/22</b>	<b>Policy and Procedure and Statutory Documents</b>	
	There is work required to update the policy and procedure documents of the organisation.	
<b>31/22</b>	<b>Health and Safety and Insurance claims (standing item) verbal update</b>	
	The Business Manager advised that despite challenge, an insurance claim for tree damage caused by storm Eunice had been settled with liability attributed to the Conservators.	
<b>32/22</b>	<b>Data breaches (standing item) verbal update</b>	
	There were none.	
<b>33/22</b>	<b>Election of Chair and Vice Chair of the Committee for the following year</b>	
	<p>Chair: Ms Thomas was nominated by Mr de Mestre and seconded by Ms St Pierre. Ms Thomas was duly elected to the position of Chair for the term of one year.</p> <p>Vice-Chair: Mr Goldie-Scot was nominated by Cllr Pragnell and was seconded by Mr Reid. Mr Goldie-Scot was duly elected to the position of Vice-Chair for the term of one year.</p>	

	Ms Thomas took the Chair and the committee thanked Mr de Mestre for his time and work.	
<b>34/22</b>	<b>Any Urgent Item of which the Clerk has notice in order to pass to the elected Chairman</b>	
	The CEO reported a recent issue with the business current account that had led to the account being temporarily frozen. The Finance Officer is researching alternative banks with enhanced ethical credentials.	

The meeting closed at 15:00