



Minutes of the Extraordinary Board Meeting of the Board of Conservators
Monday 31 January 2022 at 14.00
The Civic Centre, Uckfield, East Sussex, TN22 1AE

Present: Ms S McAll (Chair), Mrs R St Pierre (Vice Chair), Mr C de Mestre, Mrs S Tidy, Mr J Squire, Cllr P Pragnell, Cllr P Roundell, Mr A Reid, Mr C Smith, Ms F Thomas, Mrs L Maudslay and Mrs E Riminton-Drury.

In attendance: Mr J Adler (CEO) and Mrs K Dirs (Business Services Manager)

Minutes were taken by the Business Services Manager

Members of the public present: Approximately 55 members of the public were in attendance

	Item	Action
	The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and outlined the format for the meeting.	
10/22	Apologies Mr Stogdon and Mr de Mestre	
11/22	Declarations of any interest by Members of a Personal or Prejudicial Nature None	
12/22	Introduction from the CEO <p>The CEO gave a summary of the headline issues which had led to the proposal to introduce parking payments on Ashdown Forest and thanked the public for responding to the Public Consultation, noting just under 2,800 responses were received. He then explained the constitution of the Forest, its governing legislation, environmental protections and financial challenges, and the need for unrestricted funds to meet the costs of general management and maintenance of the Forest as an open-access public amenity.</p> <p>The CEO spoke of the difficulties managing a busy Forest with over 1.4 million annual visits, alongside maintaining the internationally important habitats without significant financial support, setting out that the budget of under £1M is not enough to maintain the Forest as it is, let alone to broaden access. He cautioned that if the Forest does not generate sustainable funding, then it will continue to deteriorate and if car parks cannot be maintained, some may have to be closed. In the worst-case scenario, if the Forest's environment value is not maintained, it may lose its special protections.</p> <p>The CEO then clarified the relationship with East Sussex County Council and the role of the Conservators, constituted by the 1974 Act of Parliament, to care for the Forest and its rare habitats. He stated that securing sustainable, unrestricted funding is key to the health and future of the Forest and that paying to park on the Forest is part of the solution to meet the funding needs, highlighting that Ashdown Forest is now the exception in not asking visitors to contribute to the Forest's upkeep.</p> <p>The CEO concluded his introduction by thanking again all those who had responded to the Public Consultation and all those who attended the meeting. He emphasised that whilst car park payments offered a realistic funding solution, car park payments alone would not cover the Forest's needs and alternative income streams are still needed to maintain and enhance Ashdown Forest.</p>	
	The formal meeting was suspended to take questions from the public	

13/22	Questions from the public in relation to the introduction of parking charges on Ashdown Forest (30 minutes)	
	<p>The Business Services Manager explained 37 communications had been received from the public prior to the meeting. Many of the comments were similar in theme so questions had been grouped together in order to address as many comments as possible. The Business Services Manager advised there was not time to read the names of all those who had submitted questions, but an email response would be issued to each individual.</p> <p><u>Questions received in advance:</u></p> <p>1. Have the consultation responses been listened to? Answer: The CEO responded that, having looked carefully at all of the consultation responses, a key finding was the feedback on the Forest still being accessible to low-income households and individuals, and this would be reviewed carefully. The CEO recognised that difficult and sometimes unpopular decisions need to be made to ensure the protection of the Forest. The Conservators exist to make those decisions.</p> <p>2. Have alternative funding streams been investigated and why have ESCC changed their funding? Answer: The CEO explained that ESCC used to give the Forest a grant of £120,000 per year. They voted to remove this following the financial crisis and austerity changes. The Forest should stand on its own feet financially by using the permissions contained within the Act. The CEO advised the Forest has explored and implemented other income opportunities which include donations and voluntary contributions, but this has not generated sufficient income. Costs have also been reduced as part of a recent staff restructure. The Friends and The Ashdown Forest Foundation have provided considerable support, but it is important to recognise that it is not car parking payments OR other income streams; it is car parking payments AND other income streams that are required to support the Forest.</p> <p>3. How will you implement the payments and why have you recommended the medium figure? Answer: The CEO advised the specifics of implementation are detailed within the Business Case, which will be subject to refinement should the Board approve payments. It is proposed to use a professional company who have a specialist skillset as the small staff team do not have the capacity to manage this. The medium tariff is a guide in principle to create a tender proposal.</p> <p>4. What happens if people try to park elsewhere than in the car parks? Answer: The CEO advised a number of questions had been raised in relation to displacement parking and accepted some people may try and get around paying to support the Forest. It is hoped the majority of visitors will understand that their contribution will support the Forest but for those that do not, the team will work closely with the appropriate enforcement agencies. Those who dangerously obstruct the highway may be subject to possible legal action.</p> <p>5. Will concessions be available? Answer: The CEO responded that, whilst sensitive to peoples' needs, the proposed Annual Pass acts as a substantial concession for many who visit the Forest regularly. The proposed payment of £80 per year equates to 22p per day. This is in contrast to Epping Forest who charge £150 per annum. Nonetheless the team will work with individual user groups, such as the Scouts and Duke of Edinburgh Award, to understand their needs.</p> <p>6. What will the income be used for? Answer: The CEO explained that the income will stay on the Forest and will be used to support the public access via maintaining the car parks, bridges, tracks, litter collection, and the resources to deliver this.</p>	

7. How can access be maintained and broadened?

Answer: The CEO responded that he hoped to be able to support those on low incomes to visit the Forest and is also interested in working with GPs and other organisations on initiatives such as green prescribing. There are also those who do not visit the countryside because they do not feel welcomed or safe. The CEO explained he would like to work closely with those groups supporting them to help them visit the Forest.

The CEO reported that some lovely suggestions have been received from people asking whether those who can afford to pay could contribute extra to provide Annual Passes/Day Tickets to those less able. This sort of suggestion will be looked at carefully.

The Chair then invited questions from the floor.

Name: William Martin-Elly

Question: ESCC have withdrawn the funding from the Forest, but still nominate the majority of Conservators on the Board. How is this allowed?

Answer (CEO): Parliamentary legislation governs the Board constitution and ESCC are responsible for the appointment of 8 Conservators along with the Lord of the Manor position – 9 positions in total. Although ESCC appoint the majority of Conservators, these do not have to be councillor appointees and the current constitution is made up of 7 appointees and 2 councillors.

Name: John Lay

Chelwood Gate saw an influx of visitors during the pandemic and was overrun with people parking on verges and junctions making it difficult for other vehicles to pass. What assistance will the Forest give to local communities to help manage displacement parking?

Answer (CEO): The staff will look carefully for how to work with local communities and will have conversations with local authorities and the Police to help if displacement parking becomes an issue. Further work would then be required.

Name: Mike Coyne (representing Green Transition Crowborough)

Given the damage that fossil fuel cars create, what other provisions will be put in place for electric/low carbon vehicles/public transport. Will the Forest be setting an example with its own vehicles?

Answer (CEO): Public transport is outside the remit of the Conservators. The Conservators have begun the exploration of introducing electric charging points at certain car parks. The Conservators will be looking at the fleet of vehicles that supports the Forest.

Name: Tara McLean

GoodBox cashless technology has been installed in a number of charitable venues with a good response. It is worth exploring this facility and recommending a minimum donation value?

Answer (CEO): There are QR codes in every car park across the Forest, but these have only generated £10k in donations in the last few years. There has been limited uptake in donations and sustainable income needs to be generated. The Royal Parks, National Trust and Epping Forest all ask for payments for parking alongside donations.

Name: John Rogers

St Johns car park was built in 1988 to ease school congestion. The car park relieves vehicle pressure from the surrounding roads, but parking has got far worse over the years and is now a major problem. If parking charges are implemented at St Johns car park, congestion and displacement parking will cause chaos in the area.

What is the status of Ashdown Forest being a Charitable Trust? If the Conservators are a Charitable Trust, they should be independent with an independent Board. Have the Conservators challenged the Council why they have removed the grant? Can assurances be made that there are no conflicts of interest on the Board.

	<p>Answer (CEO): The Conservators are not a charity, and the Ashdown Forest Trust is a separate entity and is not managed by the Conservators. The Conservators have fought long and hard to preserve funding for the Forest, but it is down to ESCC where they choose to spend their money.</p> <p>In response to congestion from the school, the CEO advised there would be engagement with the school to ensure congestion is minimised.</p>	
	<p>The formal meeting was then reconvened.</p>	
14/22	<p>To review the Interpretation of the Public Consultation and Recommendation</p> <p>The Chair invited Board Members to make comments.</p> <p>Mrs Tidy thanked everyone for coming to the meeting and was glad that people are passionate about the Forest. She acknowledged there is ongoing work to do to build alternative ways of funding but found it heart-warming to see how much people cared about the Forest. Mrs Tidy asked how people would make (parking) payments and whether there was the ability to allow less abled people to access the Forest.</p> <p>The CEO responded that cash payments would not be introduced as machines were vulnerable to theft and vandalism. It was anticipated there would be payment machines on the Forest, but people could buy a ticket before they left home via the internet, an app or via a text service on an ordinary phone. Tickets would also be available from the Forest Centre and tickets would be valid across all car parks.</p> <p>The CEO acknowledged the Forest is difficult to access for the less mobile, and in some cases is inaccessible. There are no off-road mobility vehicles and there is a need to improve access.</p> <p>Cllr Howell said she had been walking on the Forest since she was a child and was passionate about the Forest. She expressed concern that the Forest would become urbanised with parking infrastructure and paraphernalia.</p> <p>The CEO advised that infrastructure would be kept to a minimum on the Forest and in rural sites, the signage is green and in keeping with the environment. There is however a need for more informative signage in the car parks so everyone can enjoy the Forest responsibly.</p> <p>Ms Maudslay explained she had lived on the Forest for many years and her family had been involved in the original fundraising to purchase the Forest. She understood the Forest had a number of very special protections and wanted to know what would happen if the Forest was not protected.</p> <p>The CEO explained the Site of Special Scientific Interest, Special Area of Conservation and Special Protection Area designations and that the Forest had the highest level of environmental protection. He explained that if there is not enough money to maintain the Forest then the environmental status will decline, and the Forest would face a biodiversity crisis. A loss of ground nesting bird species could, in the worst case scenario, result in the 400m planning protection being withdrawn which in turn would allow new development up to the Forest boundary.</p> <p>Mr Reid then spoke and congratulated the team for providing a detailed proposal and recommendation. He explained he had seen a decline in the state of the Forest in the last 60 years but was energised by the new direction of the Forest, noting that the Board meeting being held in a large public venue was the first of its kind. Mr Reid led a vote of thanks to the CEO and his team for making the courageous decision to propose a funding solution that would not be universally popular.</p> <p>Ms Riminton-Drury spoke and explained she was relatively new to the Board. Despite using the Forest for many years she had not been aware of the work that is required to maintain the Forest.</p>	

She hoped the subject would raise awareness to help improve funding for the Forest and asked what the risk would be if car park payments were not introduced.

The CEO responded that car parks had been degrading over years and were in need of repair. The pandemic had brought further visitor pressure and along with bad weather, many of the tracks and rides had been washed away. The land cannot be tarmacked but if payments were not introduced there would be ongoing, limited funding which would lead to challenging discussions about which car parks, paths and rides could remain open.

Cllr Roundell asked for clarity around displacement parking, enforcement and yellow lines. The CEO explained that active conversations had been opened with ESCC Highways, WDC and the Police on this area.

The Vice-Chair then spoke and explained she had been on the Board since 2005. She was aware a number of interesting fundraising proposals had been made to the team and asked how feasible such proposals were.

The CEO responded that grant funding like the Heritage Lottery Fund will not normally pay for the costs of an entire project and will not, normally, pay for ongoing maintenance. This would mean the Conservators would have to budget for long term maintenance for new projects which they do not presently have. Many of the suggestions proposed in the consultation responses require significant initial capital outlay, which is not presently available.

Cllr Pragnell concluded comments from the Board, reaffirming the Conservators had fought hard to challenge the removal of council grant funding. He echoed Mr Reid's thanks to the team and expressed his joy at the public response to the consultation, which surpassed expectations.

15/22 Board Vote on the introduction of car parking charges on Ashdown Forest

I. To approve the introduction of car parking charges on Ashdown Forest

The Chair summarised the position and asked the Board for a proposer and seconder to carry the motion.

The adoption of the proposal to introduce car parking charges on Ashdown Forest was proposed by Mr Smith and seconded by Mrs Tidy and approved unanimously by a show of hands. Mrs Tidy explained that she had seconded the proposal as she wanted her name to go against something to improve the Forest and give visitors a better experience. **It was resolved to introduce car parking payments on Ashdown Forest.**

II. To agree the recommendation of the medium tariff (subject to the approval of 15/22.1)

The Chair summarised the proposal and took questions from the Board. Ms Riminton-Drury asked whether the rate for day visits could be simplified and whether shorter passes could be considered.

Ms Thomas asked whether consideration could be given to those on lower income who may need to pay over a period of time. Mr Mawdsley commented on the need for affordability.

Ms Maudslay asked how the charges compare with similar organisations. The CEO explained the charges were comparable to other organisations and detailed those from the published business case.

The Chair summarised the position and asked the Board for a proposer and seconder to carry the motion. The adoption of the medium charging tariff was proposed by Mrs St Pierre and seconded

	by Mr Squire and approved unanimously by a show of hands. It was resolved to use the medium tariff as a basis for the tendering process.	
16/22	Any urgent Item of which the Clerk has noticed in order to pass to the elected Chair	
	There being no further business, the meeting closed at 15:35.	

Chair _____

Clerk _____

14 March 2022