

**MINUTES OF THE
FINANCIAL & REGULATORY COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE
BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST**

Monday 30 October 2023
14:00 at the Ashdown Forest Centre

Committee members present: Ms Ffion Thomas (Chair), Mr N Goldie-Scot (Vice-Chair), Tony Reid

Ex-Officio: Mrs R St Pierre, Ms S McAll

Also present: Mr A Walmsley (Countryside Manager) , Mr C Ball (Finance Officer) and Mrs E Riminton Drury (Conservator)

Minutes taken by Zoe Nichols (Administration Manager)

		Action
21/23	Apologies Mr R Stogdon, Cllr P Pragnell	
22/23	Declarations of interest by Members of a Personal or Prejudicial Nature None	
23/23	<p>Matters Arising</p> <p>The minutes from last meeting were approved.</p> <p>Actions : Rent and Rates – follow up on outstanding rent and rates.</p> <p>Finance officer confirmed that there have been issues with rents and rates including arrears, but payment rates are better this year. The process has been changed so requests go out before being asked for.</p> <p>No wood permits will be granted where rent or rates are arrears.</p> <p>The Vice-Chair noted that it would be useful to ensure that Commoners understand what it means to be a Commoner , so they fully understand their rights and the benefits.</p> <p>The Chair noted that the level of acceptable reserves was under discussion and that this would be dealt with under the Statutory Documents item later on the agenda.</p> <p>The advertising for refreshment licences was discussed , and the Finance Officer confirmed that there are currently no coffee licences as the current provider had ceased to trade, although there has since been an enquiry. The ice cream licence is still active.</p>	

		Action
24/23	<p>Finance <i>24.01/23 To recommend the draft 2024/2025 budget & commentary for approval by the Board</i></p> <p>The Finance Officer reported on the budget. There was a small surplus on income over expenditure for CORE and a deficit on Countryside Stewardship as the organisation catches up on delivery of Countryside Stewardship work over the winter. Drivers of income on the Core budget are unrestricted funding up £146K on last year. This is due to car parking which has seen a £56k increase and this is the level that has been used for the forecast for next year. The Wealden DC payment for the SAMMS Lead Warden programme has increased £85k on last year. Barn shop sales are down £18k on budget, with the barn project having had to be put on hold however by having staff available there are signs that public engagement is increasing. There is a £32k capital expenditure increase budgeted from Friends and TAFF. The number of people using car parks fluctuates, and the expectation of higher numbers over the summer did not materialise, which is likely due to the poor weather, as numbers were much higher in the Spring. No actual numbers on car parking and visitors but amount fluctuates, Budgeting car parking will become easier as data builds up over time. The issue was raised as to whether the business side of dog walking and riding licenses could be developed, and it was agreed that this was something that could be considered in the future. Administration of filming rights are currently outsourced but revenue has fallen so moving back into organisation should be considered and this needs to be investigated. Action: Administration Manager to look into this.</p> <p>The Finance Officer reported that the expenditure forecast was up on the 23/24 budget. Staff costs are £686k including the Countryside Stewardship. Core staff costs are up £60k on the 23/24 budget. This is because they include a new ranger to fill out the role which is currently three days a week. Currently the rangers are not able to meet requirements and the recharges are consistently falling behind targets. Operational costs are up £106k up on budget 23/24 : Car Park expenses are up £27k in line with revenues and forecast for 23/24, Tree management work up £10k, car park maintenance up £8k and H&S related matters up £46k. Ongoing training needs to be addressed. Increased capital expenditure is offset by income. The budget foresees a £1k surplus.. With Countryside Stewardship the main driver is staffing costs. The budget includes a new grazing team member to get back up to three with 80% of salary cost reclaimed as overhead recharge. Contractors cover the work that cannot be actioned by staff. 3.5 rangers are allocated to core and not Countryside Stewardship. The Finance Manager will have a look at splitting the revenue into specific items. A confidential discussion was help by the Conservator members of the committee pertaining to the employment of the new CEO. The Finance Officer reported that union negotiations around pay uplift were ongoing with a final decision awaited. The proposed uplift has been included in the budget.</p> <p>The Committee reviewed the draft 2023/2024 budget and agreed to recommend to the Board for approval.</p>	

		Action
	<p><i>24.02/23 To review Mid Term Financial Plan (MTFP)</i></p> <p>The Finance officer reported on the mid term financial plan. Landscape Recovery was discussed , which is currently subject to application. Countryside Stewardship cannot run alongside Landscape Recovery after the two year development stage. The interaction between Landscape Recovery and Countryside Stewardship income is currently unclear and there is a potential timing gap between them in 2025. Further advice on this issue will be sought. It was discussed that Mark Infield should prepare a paper on Landscape Recovery for the Board.</p> <p>The Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) is replacing the Basic Payment Scheme and there is concern that individual Commoners will not be able to receive this, and Commoners may need to consider forming a single unit to be able to claim. Car parking arrangements will not change for 3 years when the contract comes up for renewal.</p> <p><i>24.03/23 to review the 2023/2024 Q2 finance summary</i></p> <p>The Finance Officer reported that income was up £141k budget and expenditure was down £24k . Core income and expenditure have a surplus of £80k. Income was up £118k on budget, primarily due to the car parking element of £50k above budget and the WDC SAMMS Lead warden income of £33k not having been budgeted as there was no visibility of it happening.</p> <p>Core income is likely to be below budget for 2nd half of year.</p> <p>The drivers of the increase in expenditure are the appointment of temporary staff to roles that needed filling, and the cost of obtaining advice on pension related matters. Countryside stewardship income is up on budget due to an increase on LH1 rates of £31 per hectare.</p> <p>The wording in the document relating to a new banking provider being sought was discussed. It was agreed that the wording would be amended to reflect that a provider is being sought which is more aligned to the values of the Forest. The Finance Officer reported that to date it had not been possible to find an alternative provider.</p> <p><i>24.04/23 To note the implementation of the annual pay award</i></p> <p>The annual pay award is under discussion. ESCC made an offer £1925 per spinal point and 3.88 % for senior leadership. This was accepted by Unison, but the agreement of two other Unions is awaited. A response is expected shortly.</p> <p><i>24.05/23 To agree the Forest Rate for 2024/25</i></p> <p>The Finance Manger highlighter the formula adopted by the Board in 2017 for the increase in the Forest Rate, using CPI + 1% or 5% , whichever is the greater. The CPI for September 2023 was 6.7 (+1%) so 7.7% is greater. The majority of Commoners fall withing the Rate Category 1 which represents an increase of £2.28.</p> <p><i>24.06/23 To agree fee and charges for 2024/2025</i></p> <p>The proposed fees were discussed and the increase of of 6 % was agreed in line with the CPI for Recreation and Culture for September 2023 which was 6.0.</p> <p>The Committee reviewed the Fees and Charged for 2023/2024 and agreed to recommend to the Board for approval.</p>	<p>MI to provided paper on Landscape Recovery for the Board</p> <p>This has now been finalised at the rates detailed. CS</p>

		Action
25/23	<p>Forest Amenity 25.01/23 <i>Parking payments implementation – verbal update</i> The Finance Officer had already addressed this. There has been some sign vandalism and a member of the public passed some information which has led to an arrest. The cost of replacing the signs will be shared by the Forest and Horizon. A report will be prepared for Q3 when a full year of parking charges has run.</p>	
26/23	<p>Breach of Bye-Law- issues and Encroachment The Countryside Manager reported that there has illegal parking in Old Forge Lane. This is being dealt with and ESCC is to send a letter.</p>	
27/23	<p>Licences, Permits, Rates and Wayleaves (standing item) Verbal update No matters arising. There has been an enquiry as to the process to end a licence.</p>	
28/23	<p>Employment and Staffing Arrangements (Standing Item) -Verbal update The Administration Manager was welcomed. An update was provided on the recruitment of the new CEO. A Deer Ranger is being recruited to replace an existing position.</p>	
29/23	<p>Policy and Procedures and Statutory Documents (Standing item) Verbal update. The Finance Officer reported on the correction of typographical error on the AGAR report, this was noted previously , but is being reported formally to this Committee. The Chair reported on discussions around the policy of managing reserves The Standing Orders specify that six months of operating expenses are to be held as reserve. This is based on JPAG which recommends 3 to 6 months. In order to manage the timing difference between receipt of Countryside Stewardship payment, and the need for works to be undertaken in advance of this, there are occasions when the level of reserves falls below the six month threshold. A review of the reserves threshold level and process for calculating the operating costs upon which this is based will be undertaken and a proposal made to the Board ahead of the next review of the Standing Orders. Action: Finance officer to provide and analysis of 3 years reserves , and a recommendation to ne made whether the basis for reserve levels should be amended.</p>	CB actioned.
30/23	<p>Health and Safety and insurance claims (-Standing item) Verbal update The Countryside Manager provided an update on the tree safety incident that occurred on the Forest. The HSE has finished its investigation and further updates are awaited.</p>	
31/23	<p>Data Breaches -(standing Item) -Verbal update There were none.</p>	
32/33	<p>Election of Chair and Vice-Chair of the committee for the following year Chair: Ms Thomas was nominated by Mr Reid and Seconded by Ms St Pierre. Ms Thomas was duly elected to the position of Chair for the term of one year. Vice Chair: Mr Goldie-Scott was nominated by Mr Reid and seconded by Ms St Pierre. Mr Goldie-Scott was duly elected to the position of vice-chair for the term of one year.</p>	
33/23	<p>Any Urgent Item of which the Clerk has notice in order to pass to the elected Chairman The Finance Officer raised the matter of re-appointing the auditors. It is good practice to consider the matter every 5 years, and the current auditors have been in place for 5 years. However this is only the second year that the Finance Officer has dealt with them. He approached a different company , whose costs were similar to the current one. It was agreed to continue with the current Firm for the time being, but this is to be kept under review .</p>	

The meeting closed at 15.30