

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

Monday 19 February 2024

14:00 at the Ashdown Forest Centre

Committee members present: Ms F Thomas (Chair), Mr N Goldie-Scot (Vice Chair), Mr A G Reid, Mr R Stogden and Cllr P Pragnell.

Ex-Officio: Mrs R St Pierre

Also present: Mr C Ball (Finance Officer) and Ms Z Nichols (Administration Manager)

Three members of the public present.

Minutes taken by the Administration Manager

		Action
	The Chair introduced the Committee and asked members of the public if they had any questions. Although no questions were raised, members of the public noted their concerns that it may become a requirement for dogs to be on a lead when on the Forest, and that they did not support this, although they were also concerned about the issue of dog attacks on the Forest. They also voiced concerns that positive information is not always conveyed to the public sufficiently, leading to what appears to be negative messages on social media. They stated they had no issue with parking charges. Ms St Pierre thanked them for their comments and said that she could put them in touch with the SAMMS Lead Warden in relation to the dog issue , and they said they had already spoken to her. She thanked them for their useful comments.	
01/24	Apologies Mr M Pearson (CEO)	
02/24	Declarations of interest by Members of a Personal or Prejudicial Nature None	
	Minutes of the last meeting were agreed.	
03/24	Finance <i>2023/24 Q3 Finance Report</i> The Finance Officer presented the report to the committee. There was a £225k increase in net assets on the balance sheet, this will reduce in Q4. There was an £875k fall in accrued income due to receipt of the CS grant and the High Weald AONB grant being received for the Changing Places toilet facilities. There was an £84k reduction in debtors. There are no significant arrears at the moment. For current liabilities, the most significant movements are in creditors which is down £111k, and accrued expenditure which is up £117k since the last quarter. The reduced liability is primarily due to £100k of legacy income being paid to TAFF from COAF, there is an ongoing discussion as to the treatment of those monies. Accrued expenditure is down by £102k due to RAC forestry and CS work. The work is being done currently. Income is up £210k on budget. The unrestricted budget is up £154k : £88k of this is due to car parking, £24k from ESCC for last year's deficit, and £52k from Wealden District Council in respect of SAMMS payments which were not known about when the budget was set. There was also an increase of £38k in CS funding due to changes in the per	

hectare payment rates. There will be a further increase in the per hectare payments for 2024/25 of £94k.

Expenses are up £25k on budget which all relate to administrative overheads and include increased training costs. Car parking expenses are higher than anticipated, due to higher revenues than expected.

The Finance Manager explained the two sides of funding, CS and Core for the benefit of the public.

CS monies are government funding and are expected to be used in their entirety.

Core income currently has a surplus of £183k, £116k up on the budgeted surplus. The income drivers are licences and Forest rates which are up £30k, rents are up £12k and there is a £22k increase for riding permits. Ice cream and filming licences are down £3k each. Income from donations is down £8k, this is due to memorial funding which is now paid through TAFF and will catch up in Q4. There was a £7k increase in Forest products: primarily from meat sales and work is underway to make this a more commercial venture. The development of the Information Barn was placed on hold last year, and may have resulted in the lower than budgeted income levels. This project will be revisited..

An additional £9k is due to interest rate increases. Restricted funds are £5k down on budget, it is COAF policy to seek external funding or donations for capital items.

Expenditure is up £46k on budget and staff costs lower than budget due to reduced headcount. Car parking revenue is higher than budget.

The Finance officer explained that with CS funding there is a surplus that needs to be spent to catch up each year due to funds being received in arrears. The main concern is that there is still a lag between the cross-charge that is made from CS to Core funding, where rangers undertake work relating to CS, but which cannot currently be maximised due to staff levels.

The Chair noted that it was a challenge managing the cashflow so that sufficient required work could be carried out during the busy winter season, when the CS funds are usually not received until later in the year.

The Finance Officer said that this was being looked into by the new CEO, who has now been in position for 3 weeks.

The Chair raised the concern that now there is likely to be an increase in the cost of managing bracken given it will no longer be sprayed, and whether additional funds for this are likely to be provided within the CS funding in future.

The Finance Officer stated that this year the core funding was level in the budget and that it was anticipated the year would end with a surplus.

The Vice Chair raised the matter of the increased income from car parking, noting that he is conscious of the public perception if the car parks are not improved. The Finance Officer stated that the car parking monies are for the overall management of the Forest, and not necessarily just for improving car parks, however this is an important consideration, and Mark Infield has written a report which will go to the Board and then be made public regarding car parking income and expenditure.

Mr Reid raised the matter of the need for the Programme and Financial and Regulatory committees to interact effectively, particularly in terms of having a robust Business Plan that ensured cashflow considerations and project planning were aligned. Following discussion, it was unanimously agreed that this should be raised as an agenda item for the next Board meeting.

Action: Ms Nichols to arrange for an item discussing the interaction between Programme and Finance and Regulatory Committees to be added to the next Board agenda.

ZN

<p>04/24</p>	<p>Policy and Procedure and Statutory Documents <i>04.01/24 To recommend the revised Standing Orders for Board approval</i> The Chair went through the proposed changes, and these were discussed by the Committee.</p> <p>The Committee unanimously supported the proposal to recommend the Revised Standing Orders to the Board for approval.</p> <p><i>04.02/24 To recommend the revised Financial Regulations for Board approval</i> The Chair went through the proposed changes, and these were discussed by the Committee.</p> <p>The Committee unanimously supported the proposal to recommend the revised Financial Regulations to the Board for approval.</p> <p><i>04.03/24 To recommend the Revised General risk management plan 2024/2025 to the Board for approval.</i> The Chair noted, that the current general risk management plan is a retrospective document, but that going forwards a full review of the structure, format and content of the risk management framework should be undertaken. It had been planned that this would be done last year, and work had started on creating a new risk management plan, based on a Red, Amber, Green approach. However, this was put on hold with James Adler’s passing and will now be looked at further by the new CEO. The Committee discussed this.</p> <p>The Committee unanimously supported the proposal to recommend the Revised General Risk Management plan to Board for approval.</p> <p><i>04.04/24 To recommend the revised Finance Risk Management Plan 2024/2025to the Board approval</i></p> <p>The Finance Officer raised the potential risks for the organisation if a further Landscape Recovery bid were unsuccessful. He also explained the challenges of the current banking arrangements and that he has looked into alternative banking options previously, he has now identified a potential alternative banking provider, the CAF (Charities Aid Foundation) Bank . He will prepare a paper on this for the Committee.</p> <p>The Committee unanimously supported the proposal to recommend the Revised Finance Risk Management Plan 2024/2025 to the Board for approval.</p>	<p>CB</p> <p>CB</p>
<p>05/24</p>	<p>Amenity & Licencing <i>Renewal of Refreshment provision licence</i> Two tenders have been received. There is a tender from the existing provider that is slightly lower than the other one. The Committee asked for a paper to be prepared by the Administration Manager with further details so that a decision can be made. It was agreed that once the paper was circulated, a decision would be taken in writing by Committee members, ahead of the end of month notification to the two companies who tendered.</p> <p>Action: Administration Manager to prepare a paper on the ice-cream tenders and co-ordinate the decision by the Committee and response to tendering companies by end of February.</p>	<p>ZN</p>

06/24	<p>Rent and Rates Discussion</p> <p>The Finance Officer provided comparison details between outstanding sums last year and currently. There is a slight increase due to continuing accrual of arrears in certain cases.</p> <p>The Committee asked what steps were being taken to recover arrears, the Administration Manager noted that she had been carrying out work on this, the Chair noted that it was important to follow up on outstanding arrears, but that it was also important to ensure as many properties as possible retained their Commoner rights.</p> <p>The Finance Manager said that the issue is whether the Conservators wish to take a stronger approach or write-off arrears. The Committee were of the opinion that they do not want to write-off arrears. There was a discussion around firmer requests for payment for historic arrears and taking the process further.</p> <p>It was agreed that the Administration Manager would look into stronger steps that could be taken to obtain payment of arrears.</p>	ZN
07/24	<p>Encroachments and Bye – Law breaches</p> <p>The Administration Manager stated that there are usually a few issues over the year and that she endeavours to resolve them as quickly as possible.</p> <p>Where bye-law breaches occur, information is provided to prevent further issues.</p>	
08/24	<p>Health and Safety and Insurance claims (standing item) verbal update</p> <p><i>09.01/23 Health & Safety Review (NFU & Peninsula)</i></p> <p>The Finance Officer noted that this would usually be reported on by the CEO. A brief update was provided.</p> <p>The hearing date has been set for this quarter.</p> <p>The Board of conservators is to undertake mandatory H & S training next week ,</p>	
09/24	<p>Data breaches (standing item) verbal update</p> <p>There were none.</p>	
10/24	<p>Any Urgent Item of which the Clerk has notice in order to pass to the elected Chairman</p> <p>Mrs St Pierre asked about the budget for staff training and the Finance Officer advised that it was reduced from £4k to £2.5k but there may be some leeway in the H & S Budget to cover training.</p> <p>The Finance Manager raised the matter of Committee oversight of policies, which the CEO had planned to address at the meeting. The Committee discussed this, and agreed unanimously that policy oversight and approval should sit with the Financial and Regulatory Committee. The Chair noted that that it was important that policies set out high level approaches, and that details on how policy requirements were fulfilled should be set out in more detailed procedure manuals.</p>	

The meeting closed at 15:30.

Unadopted