

Minutes of the Board Meeting of the Board of Conservators
Monday 17 June 2024
Cat Protection Visitor Centre, Lewes Road, Chelwood Gate, RH17 7TT



Present: Ms S McAll (Chair), Ms E Riminton, Ms F Thomas, Mr J Squire, Ms I Manweiler, Cllr G Owen-Williams, Ms L Maudslay, Cllr R Galley, Mr N Goldie -Scot, Cllr R Milward

In attendance: Mr M Pearson (CEO and Clerk), Ms Z Nichols (Administration Manager), Mr A Walmsley (Countryside Manager)

Minutes were taken by the Administration Manager

Members of the public present: Mrs B Morgan, Mr R St Clair Jones

	Item	Action
	The Chair formally welcomed Cllr Roy Galley to the Board.	
12/24	Apologies Ms S Tidy, Ms R St Pierre and Mr A Reid The Board agreed that Flowers should be sent to Ms Tidy as she is unwell.	
13/24	Declarations of any interest by Members of a Personal or Prejudicial Nature Ms S Tidy declaration of interest in High Weald JAC	
14/24	Outstanding actions from the previous meeting The response to Wealden local plan was submitted by the CEO.	
15/24	To approve the minutes of the Board meeting of 11 March 2024 and matters arising The minutes had been circulated and assessed by the Board for accuracy. There was a change made in the Mr Goldie-Scot who had attended the meeting and the minutes were amended accordingly. Subject to amendment the minutes were duly received and were approved in accordance with Standing Order 2.6	
16/24	To receive the minutes of the Programme Committee meeting of 5 February 2024 The minutes had been circulated to the Board for accuracy. The minutes were duly received.	
17/24	The Finance and Regulatory Committee meeting of 3 June 2024 <i>17.01/24 To Approve the Statement of Account 2023/24</i> The Chair of the Finance and Regulatory Committee provided a summary of the accounts. The Statement of Account was recommended to the Board for approval. It was put forward by Ms Thomas and Seconded by Ms Riminton. The Statement of Account was approved by the Board.	

Ms Maudslay as a Commoner herself raised that commoners and residents would like to be kept more informed as to what is happening on the Forest and then Commoners would be more prepared to pay rates if they were more aware of how monies are spent on the Forest. A newsletter was proposed and Ms Maudslay and Ms Manweiler said that they are both happy to assist with this.

Mr Goldie-Scot raised that, although there is a surplus this year, parking remains contentious. Ms Thomas explained that it is the timely receipt of Countryside Stewardship this year which has meant that the surplus is the amount it is on the accounts. It is important that reserves are replaced and built up.

The Chair raised that car park maintenance is important.

Mr Goldie-Scot asked that information with regards to the percentage of rents and rates outstanding is available in the next board meeting when this is discussed.

17.02/24 Internal Audit Letter and comments

The Chair of the Finance and Regulatory Committee explained that the only point raised is that of debtor balances which are not material under the definition of Audit, and will be kept under review. It is not currently possible to do monthly reports, but they will be done quarterly with the intention of being done monthly when there is a new IT system in place, which is being researched now.

The Board confirmed that they are all happy with the contents of the letter and how it is to be dealt with.

17.03/24 To Approve the Annual Governance and Accounting Return 2023/24

The Clerk read out the Annual Governance Statement and the Board confirmed agreed.

The Board considered and approved all Governance Statements.

The Board considered and approved the Accounting Statements.

17.04/24 To approve the Health and Safety Committee constitution and Health and Safety Policy and Arrangements

The CEO confirmed that the policy will be rolled out after approval at the meeting.

The Board considered and approved the Health and Safety Committee constitution and the Health and Safety Policy and Arrangements.

The minutes of the Financial and Regulatory Committee were duly received.

18/24 CEO Update – Verbal update

The CEO said that 2023-2024 had been challenging,

He said that there were two matters that he needed to raise.

The first was the incident in January of last year where a tree felled on the Forest fell on two walkers. As the matter has now gone to a first court hearing, the insurers have now said that a letter apologising for the incident could be sent to the Leafe's and this has been done. The CEO would also like to record the apology to Mr and Mrs Leafe in these minutes.

The sentencing hearing for the matter is in August.
All of the Health and Safety documentation for the organisation has been gone through with the assistance of Peninsula and NFU Risk Management Services, both have assisted with the review of chainsawing. Peninsula have been appointed to provide ongoing support, advice and training for the organisation. Staff and Conservators have been trained in a mixture of IOSG Managing Safely and IOSH Leading Safely. Risk Assessments and Safe Systems of Work are being reviewed across the organisation. All will then be rolled out to staff and volunteers. Mark reminded everyone that H&S management will remain an ongoing process and will be a culture within the team.

The second matter was the loss of James which was recorded in the last June minutes.
The CEO would like to place on the record his thanks to the Senior Management Team and the Conservators for pulling together during a very challenging time. He thanked Beth Morgan for organising the memorial walk and confirmed that £10,000 has been raised.

Looking forward, the CEO referred to the vision document and said that there had been a workshop for the executive of COAF, TAFF and Friends to collaborate on the delivery and focus of the vision. The outcomes are:

1. An MOU to assist with collaboration, show who will fund and deliver what.
2. Business plan
3. Three-year financial plan
4. KPI and Annual report.

Amongst many positive outcomes from the workshop a couple of themes emerged. The first is volunteering which has been at its lowest level for many years and there needs to be a better volunteering experience across the Forest that is better facilitated and supported.

Another theme was Education, which has a very good foundation and needs to be integrated into the organisation. The Forest currently contracts Lisa and Paula who deliver environmental education for 32 Schools and approximately 4000 school children. The intention is to bring them in-house.

A task and finish group will be set up with some of the Conservators to draft an education strategy.

Conservation: this is a cornerstone of the vision. There is a two-year management plan. There will be a new management plan reflecting the start of a new Countryside Stewardship agreement from January 2026. The Countryside Manager and his team are working on this.

There are two matters to be addressed to deliver favourable status – deer management and grazing.

Deer Strategy: There are now 13 deer per square kilometre, having reduced from 18. The aim is to get it down to between 2 and 5 per square kilometre. This work is undertaken strategically, with key partners like the High Weald and is more effective at being delivered on a landscape scale that reaches beyond our boundaries.

Grazing: Mark Infield is writing a grazing strategy. There will also be a woodland strategy as the Forest is 40% woodland.

As part of the SAMM/ Zonation work there also needs to be a visitor services plan to move people away from the most sensitive areas.

This all then needs to go into one work programme, which is a significant piece of work.

Visitor Centre: This is an asset that in the past 10 years has suffered from not being the main focus. Steps are being taken to upgrade it to a better level and encourage more visitors.

19/24 CEO proposal for Branding for Board approval

The CEO said that there are currently four brands associated with the Forest.

	<p>The first two are used by the Forest and are the Deer and the Clump. There are then the two associated charities, Friends and TAFF.</p> <p>The CEO said that this is a little confusing and his proposal is the Deer brand is no longer used and the Conservators adopt the Clump logo only. This is a well recognised logo.</p> <p>The Board approved the proposal for branding.</p>	
20/24	<p>The Ashdown Forest Foundation (TAFF) (standing item).</p> <p>Ms Thomas summarized the report.</p> <p>She said that in April the charity had a closing balance in the Charities account of £347K.</p> <p>TAFF are now able to fund more.</p> <p>They have their first employee, Katie Jones, a part-time fundraiser. They are putting a fundraising strategy into place and then into effect, including launching a legacy funding programme. Capital expenditure will be fundraised for.</p> <p>Thanks was given to the Trustees.</p> <p>The CEO said he will provide a list of what items require funding, as a priority list. The idea then is that TAFF and Friends decide who would like to fund what. The prioritised list will range from £5k to £1m land acquisitions.</p>	
21/24	<p>Election of Chair and Vice-Chair to the Board.</p> <p>The Chair confirmed that the only nominees were herself for Chair and Ms St Pierre for vice-chair. She explained that the Standing Orders state that there can be a four-year term in exceptional circumstances. The Chair stated that the exceptional circumstances are the Health and Safety Executive matter and that she was chair at the time of the incident and feels the responsibility to see the matter to the end. She feels that it is appropriate for her to attend the hearing on the 12th August when the fine will be notified and then handle any fallout with the PR consultants if necessary.</p> <p>Therefore for a further year, the Chair and vice-chair are re-elected.</p> <p>The Chair drew attention to paragraph 1.3 of the Standing Orders which state that “unless agreed otherwise the Chairship shall alternate between Conservators elected by Commoners and Conservators appointed by Local Authorities.” This means that the next Chair of the Board should ideally be a Conservator appointed by one of the Local Authorities.</p>	
22/24	<p>Allocation of Board Members to Committees.</p> <p>Ms Thomas provided an explanation of what the Financial and Regulatory Committee do. Cllr Galley, Cllr Owen-Williams and Cllr Milward indicated that they would be happy to sit on the Financial and Regulatory Committee.</p> <p>As some members of the Board were not present, the Chair asked the Administration Manager if she would circulate a request to the Board after the meeting to ask them to confirm which Committee they would like to sit on for the coming year.</p>	ZN
23/24	<p>Any Urgent item of which the Clerk has notice in order to pass to the Chair</p> <p>23.01/24 <i>Structure and roles for bank mandate: to be minuted and signed by Chair</i></p> <p>Minuted and Document signed by the Chair.</p>	

The meeting came to a close at 15.00

Chair _____

Clerk _____