



MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE HELD ON THURSDAY 7 DECEMBER 2006 AT THE CONSERVATION BOARD OFFICES, THE LODGE, CHINNOR, COMMENCING AT 10.30AM AND CONCLUDING AT 1.12PM

Present:

Sir John Johnson	Board Member
Cllr Alan Walters	Board Member
Cllr Bill Storey	Board Member
Cllr Richard Pushman	Board Member
Kevin Mayne	Board Member
Shirley Judges	Board Member
Richard Brown	Hertfordshire County Council
Steve Rodrick	CCB Chief Officer

In Attendance:

Maureen Keyworth	BCC and Clerk to the Board
Chris Smith	CCB financial Adviser

1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED

That Sir John Johnson be elected Chairman of the Executive Committee for the ensuing year.

SIR JOHN JOHNSON IN THE CHAIR

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Rhys Goodwin, John Griffin, Chris Brearley and Mike Woods.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 6 SEPTEMBER 2006

The Minutes of the Committee Meeting, held on 6 September 2006, copies of which had been circulated, were confirmed, subject to the following amendments:

Item 8 Finance Report 2006/07.

Second paragraph, second line, insert the word 'was' after CIPFA.

Fourth paragraph first line, start of first sentence to read 'Members were informed that the figures to *the end of July*.....'

Item 14 Report on the Creation of Natural England

Penultimate line on the page should read '....this was an opportunity for *us* to....'

5. MATTERS ARISING

Item 4 Matters arising

The Chairman informed the Committee that Barry Gardiner, Under Secretary of State for DEFRA had accepted the invitation to visit the Chilterns and was making a visit on 8 March 2007. He will be taken on a tour of the Chilterns which will include tree planting on Downley Common.

Item 7: AONB Conservation Boards – Model Code of Conduct

The Committee was informed that the formal consultation was being undertaken by Defra. No further comments had been received apart from the reference to Whistleblowing.

Item 10: Report on the 40th Anniversary Parish Fund

Grant awards for 35 bids had been approved up to £8,000. The Chief Officer commented on the good geographical range of applications received.

Item 11: Report on the sustainable Development Fund

Of the 44 applications received, 18 have been approved. The value of projects supported amounted to £244,000.

Members noted that Julia Wells had joined the SDF Advisory Panel.

Item 12: Personnel Report

Members were informed that Donna Hunt had been appointed as Administration Assistant on a part time basis. However, at peak times, Donna was able to work a 35 hour week if needed to help with specific projects which had ring fenced budgets.

Item 13: Relationship with the Chiltern Woodlands Project

Members were informed that Mike Render had been appointed as a Trustee to the board to the Woodlands Project. The Chief Officer informed members that the Accord would be ready for the next meeting of the Executive Committee.

Item 14: Report on the Creation of Natural England

Members noted that Roger Clarke, a Board member of Natural England had attended the Annual Forum on 9 November 2006.

6. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no members of the public present to ask questions.

7. AUDITING 2005-06

The Committee received the report of the Chief Officer and Financial Adviser the purpose of which was to advise the Committee that the Board has complied with legislative requirements and that the final audit opinion from the Audit Commission is still awaited.

The Financial Adviser informed members that the public advertisements regarding the audit had been placed and that the Audit Report had been submitted to the Audit Commission.

The Audit Commission fee would be in the region of £2,000-£3,000.

Members NOTED that the Board has complied with the requirement of the legislation and an unqualified audit report is expected from the Audit Commission.

8. FINANCE REPORT 2006-07

The Committee received the report of the Chief Officer and Financial Adviser, the purpose of which was to advise members of the Board's financial position to the end of October and likely position at the end of the financial year.

The Financial Adviser confirmed that in light of previous discussions about the format of the report it had now been changed in accordance with the Committee's request.

The following was noted:

- The savings under Finance related to audit and payroll services. The Audit Commission fee was originally £10,500 and was invoiced in the last financial year. However, because the turnover of the Board is under £1m a full audit is not needed and the fee was therefore reduced. However, this was shown as an overspend in last year's figures which, therefore, cancels out the underspend in this year's figures.
- The variance under 'Local Authorities' relates to one LA payment which was made in the previous financial year. If the same situation arises in this financial year, it will be carried forward as an advance.
- Changes have been made to the projected outcome because some figures were not accurately forecast for the current year. This has now been rectified. The variance related to employment costs which should have included the £600 car allowance per employee. The National Insurance figure has also been re-calculated.
- The average number of visits to the website has doubled compared to last year and the cost of site maintenance has also increased. The Chief Officer proposed that the overspend be accepted.
- The third publication in the Design and Materials series would shortly be completed. It was hoped that funding from the project budget would be available to complete this but cutbacks from the Countryside Agency made it difficult. However, there was capacity for the cost to be met from the core budget.

The Committee NOTED the current financial position and APPROVED the variances and proposed re-allocations of funding.

9. DRAFT BUDGET 2007/08

The Committee received the report of the Chief Officer and Financial Adviser, the purpose of which was to seek the Committee's approval of the draft budget, to be used for negotiations with Natural England and local authorities.

SR informed the Committee that the figures were calculated on the basis of the core budget remaining the same, except for inflation. However, a further £30,000 may be needed for the preparation and review of the Management Plan.

In order to achieve a standstill budget, given that the employment costs would rise by more than inflation once cost of living and salary increments were paid, it was necessary to make savings in other parts of the budget. In this connection, there were several areas where savings could be made, such as corporate services, general business costs and the suggestion that Chris Smith could undertake the work of the Section 151 Finance Officer in place of Hertfordshire CC. There could also be further efficiency savings in operational and financial terms.

So far no indications had been received from Natural England with regard to their views on the budget. The Board had received a letter from NE inviting a grant application and it was hoped that the SDF would remain at £100,000.

When the Board was set up the CA granted core budget at up to 80% and the current position, of approx. 77%, is close to what the AONB would have had if it had not received Conservation Board status. There has been no indication from NE as to what type of project bids they would expect. In addition, NE expected its own grant supplement to be made available in October but this did not happen. There was also no current indication of the level of Local Government pay awards for the next financial year. 56% of the core budget is for employment costs. Over and above the cost of living award, the scale of salary points used (Wycombe DC scales) indicates a 2% increase. Most staff will be eligible for increments and, therefore, employment costs will rise by approximately 4.5%. This will mean that efficiency savings of 2%+ will have to be made.

Discussion took place with regard to what indicators should be used to calculate inflation - Consumer Prices Index (CPI), Retail Price Index (RPI) or the median. Government used the RPI for pensions and wages. The CPI did not include costs such as housing, mortgage interest and energy. There was a need to be clear as a Board what the budget should be for the coming year and to inform local authorities what increase is needed. In this connection, evidence of the 2% efficiency savings need to be shown to inform local authorities of the savings already being made. This would reassure local authorities that the Board has been through the exercise of identifying real efficiencies and also identified pressures for growth, one of which is the Management Plan.

Concern was expressed that local authorities may not look favourably on the request for a higher percentage increase than that which they are presenting to their own services. The suggestion that inflation costs are reflected separately to the static costs may be a way forward. 3% on budget as a whole could be difficult.

SR commented that local authorities needed to be aware that contributions to Board costs are around 17%-18%. Six years ago it was 50% and has been at standstill in real terms since that time. Members agreed that this point should be emphasised. The statutory obligations carried out by the Board on behalf of local authorities could also be reported in the executive summary.

CS suggested that the starting point for the 2007/08 budget should be standstill as at 2006/07 plus increments. Against this, financial efficiency savings should be shown together with growth items and price inflation.

The Committee noted that AW had invited SR to talk to South Bucks District Council members about the work of the Conservation Board. It was also suggested that a summary be prepared which could be circulated to local authority members. However, it was noted that it was officers who would be making recommendations to members and therefore any information should be provided to them.

1. The Committee APPROVED the draft budgets.

The Committee AGREED

- 2. To seek an inflation only increase in the core financial contributions from local authorities and a supplement to help meet the additional costs of reviewing the Management Plan.**
- 3. To seek grant aid from Natural England of
£491,620 to core costs (76.9%)
£121,000 to project costs (47.8%)
£100,000 to the Sustainable Development Fund (100%)**

4. **To approve, in principle, the appointment of Chris Smith as the Board's Finance Officer (Section 151 officer). The appointment to be confirmed subject to a report to the next meeting. In this connection, the Committee noted and appreciated the work carried out by the Chief Officer and the Financial Adviser.**

10. REPORT ON AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN REVIEW

The Committee received the report of the Chief Officer, the purpose of which was to inform the Board of the need to review the plan and the process advised by National England. A proposed timetable was put forward for consideration.

The Chief Officer reported that it was a statutory requirement to review the Management Plan. This would be an onerous task, with the guidance alone being some 50 pages in length. The Board needed to look at the plan and decide whether it needed amending prior to publication. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) also want a strategic environmental assessment to be carried out, to include a statement of community involvement. This will entail a much information gathering and collation which will take up a great deal of staff time. The Committee noted that the Cotswolds Conservation Board have commenced work on the document and will be funding the work themselves. However, the lowest tender was £30,000. The Cotswolds Planning Officer will be spending 50% of his time on this work over the next 18 months. SR said he didn't anticipate great revisions to the existing plan and that if NE wanted the guidance to be implemented in full there would be considerable resource implications and they would be expected to provide additional grant aid to meet the cost.

Members agreed that NE should be asked whether they are prepared to fund this work, otherwise the Board should just carry out a light touch report. The Board would welcome the opportunity to provide such an evidence base which would enable it to do a better job, but not at such a cost.

It was suggested that NE should be asked to look at producing a national evidence base which would be more cost effective than commissioning 37 AONBs to carry out the same study. SR agreed to raise this with NE. However, he suggested it may be better to ask NE for extra money in order to improve the information which the Board already has. The evidence gathering would be beneficial. Members agreed on the need to make sure all AONBs were of the same opinion with regard to this project. KM suggested that once SR has received further information a risk assessment should be carried out on the impact of such a project.

With regard to the Management Plan, members noted that the Secretary of State did not need to sign off the Plan. The Board can review the plan and then make the decision as to whether the amendments suggested were of sufficient scale to require the Plan to be reviewed and published.

SR suggested that because the grant application has to be with NE by the year end, provision for this work must be included. CS commented that the budget would need to be re-positioned in light of any further funding need.

The Committee AGREED

1. **To include in the draft Budget for 2007-8 and 2008-09 adequate funding for the review, estimated to be £30,000 per annum.**
2. **To advise Natural England and local authorities of the resource implications and need for their assistance with acquiring the necessary information.**

11. REPORT ON CCB SUSTAINABILITY PLAN

The Committee received the report of the Chief Officer and Financial Adviser, the purpose of which was to advise the Committee of progress in implementing the Board's Sustainability Plan.

The Chief Officer reported that the information base was not complete due to the short period of time in which the plan had been in place

KM would provide the annual report to the Board in Spring 2007.

The Committee AGREED

- 1. To improve the information base on which performance is assessed.**
- 2. To seek further advice on energy saving options.**
- 3. To install solar photovoltaic cells at the office.**
- 4. To present an annual report on performance to a Board meeting in March 2007.**

12. RENEWABLE ENERGY GENERATION

The Committee received the report of the Chief Officer and Planning Officer, the purpose of which was to seek the Committee's approval to install photovoltaic cells for electricity production at the Board's offices.

Investigations had been undertaken into the best means of installing renewable energy capacity and reducing energy demand. Wind turbines would not prove to be viable and photovoltaic cells were the best option. These would cost approximately £5,000 without a grant. They were low maintenance and could be removed if the offices were vacated.

- 1. The Committee AGREED that solar PV panels with a generating capacity of 1.4Kw be installed at the Board's offices in Chinnor.**
- 2. The Committee APPROVED expenditure of up to £6,000, to be funded from underspend on the core budget, SDF (if funds available) and, if necessary, from reserves.**
- 3. The Committee AGREED that, if necessary, reserves of up to £6,000 be allocated to this initiative.**
- 4. The Committee AGREED that a policy be adopted of allocating 5% of any delegate fee charged for attending an event to the cost of installing the solar panels as a carbon offset scheme.**
- 5. The Committee AGREED that staff should be congratulated on their performance regarding energy saving and that they be encouraged to continue the good work.**

13. PERSONNEL REPORT

The Committee received the report of the Chief Officer, the purpose of which was to inform members of the progress in reviewing the Employment Policies and Conditions of Service and the need for further work, to be presented to the Board in early 2007.

The following was noted:

- Further work was needed on the salary grading process which had previously been dealt with by Wycombe District Council. Training was needed on the Hay System.
- KM suggested a handbook should be produced containing all the personnel policies, which could be revised as and when new procedures needed to be put in place.
- SJ expressed concern regarding the policy on taking time off in lieu and wondered whether there was scope for one off payments if necessary. She also hoped that in the future there would be scope for sabbaticals for staff. The Committee noted the system of time off in lieu was working well.
- With regard to any grievance procedures, backup would be given by the County Council.
- RP informed members of the work of graduate employees on secondment from John Lewis, which encouraged staff to take on alternate forms of working. SR agreed to look into this.

The Committee AGREED

1. To request that a revision of the Employment Policies and Conditions of Service be presented to the Committee for consideration and adoption at its meeting in February 2007.
2. To secure external personnel/HR services to help complete this task and to provide ongoing support.
3. To use WDC salary grades for 2007-08.
4. That double time off in lieu can be taken for any statutory public holiday worked, with immediate effect.

14. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

None.

15. DATES OF NEXT AND FUTURE MEETINGS

The next meeting of the Executive Committee will be on Tuesday 27 February 2007 at 10.30am.

Dates of future meetings are as follows:

Executive Committee

2007

Tuesday 15 May
 Tuesday 18 September
 Tuesday 11 December

Board

2007

Tuesday 23 January
 Wednesday 28 March
 Tuesday 19 June
 Wednesday 10 October

CHAIRMAN