

Minutes of Forest Volunteers Meeting held on 10th February 2015

Present: Diane Hughes, Terry Ferguson, Joan Ferguson, David Wood, Elizabeth Wiggins, Andrew White, Graham White, Pauline Lazell, Dave Wood, Robin Watkin, Andy Brocklebank, Tony Pearce, David Pryor, Jean Sargeant, Guy Lambourne and Nick Webb

Guy welcomed everyone to the meeting.

1. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Nigel Davis, Elaine Wheeler, Sue Livens, Tony Kirchin, Michael & Diane Briscoe, Kay Peddar, Bob Hook, Ioana Bejan, Margaret Goose (who will be moving to Norfolk shortly), Celia Judge, Pam Hulance and Robin Morgan.

2. Minutes of Last Meeting

Joan Ferguson proposed that the minutes be accepted as a true record of the meeting. This was seconded by Elizabeth Wiggins and the minutes were signed by the Chairman.

3. Matters Arising

Atlas Copco Compressor – David Pryor reported that his son-in-law will be meeting with the Manager of the Commercial Division next week to arrange delivery. David has spoken to Tony Crofts to keep him in the picture.

Christmas Tree Festival – Joan commented on the marvellous Father Christmases! David Wood, one of the said Father Christmases, remarked that it was a very hot job – inside the costume was 28°C. Sam Hayden had sent grateful thanks to everyone who helped over the weekend. Around 2500 people attended with income in the region of £2500.

Volunteers' Scrub Bash – it had been a very enjoyable day and a good job to do. You could see where we had been! Anna's decision to change the venue from the callow mounds had been a sound one. After discussion, it was decided to move the date next year to a weekend later in January, i.e. 17th/18th.

Tree Planting – there had been a great turnout of around 450 people and, despite the mud, everyone seemed to enjoy themselves. This was the most people ever to attend a tree planting event. In fact, we nearly ran out of stakes. No doubt the beautiful, sunny weather was a factor. Questions were asked about future events. Guy said that Neville's Funeral Service and Church End Lower School will be planting in the next few weeks when volunteers would be needed. The end of March is normally the latest time for planting bare-rooted trees. Availability of land is becoming an issue.

4. Tree Planting Donation

With the Chairman's permission, Andy Brocklebank introduced the issue of a donation of £200 ahead of his Treasurers' Report. Volunteers were e-mailed in January to ask whether they would agree to a donation of £200 to The Trust to support the tree planting event. No negative responses had been received. Andy was now seeking formal ratification from the meeting. Joan Ferguson proposed the motion and David Pryor seconded it. The motion was carried unanimously.

5. Treasurer's Report

Andy reported that we had £226.52 in cash, £899.96 in our current account and £7000.00 in our savings account, giving a total of £8126.48. Taking into account the £200 donation to the Trust just agreed, this leaves an available balance of £7926.48. Andy concluded by saying that we need the Trust to tell us what we can spend our money on. Guy thanked Andy for his input.

6. Trustee's Report

In Nigel's absence, Nick Webb presented the report of the 14th January meeting of the Board.

Nick reported that Guy had been the first "guinea pig" to attend a Trust meeting. Other members of staff will be invited to attend in rotation. It is intended as a Question & Answer session. Commentree was discussed and Guy said that recently it had been distributed entirely electronically. No complaints had been received and it had significantly reduced the cost of distribution. In future, the intention was to publish a bi-annual report, probably in April and November, in the form of a newsletter which will be distributed at the Forest Centre. The importance of pushing the charity message had been stressed. Guy had been asked about his biggest challenges. He replied that identifying and prioritising which communities to engage with and how best to spend his time were the biggest challenges. Sometimes it is a case of who shouts loudest and sometimes it is project led. He also talked about training some volunteer "ambassadors" who would be able to go out and talk to groups (WI's, etc) about the work of the Trust, taking the pressure off himself and other members of staff. Guy said he had little knowledge of what skills Board members possessed and suggested confidential copies of CV's might be useful. Guy would like to be able to contact Board Members and to be able to use their particular skills from time to time. It was agreed that Trustees would provide CV's to staff. It had been suggested that, after the elections, Guy and Nick should present to local councils to promote the work of the Trust.

The 2015/6 budget had been discussed at length. Whilst we expect to make a deficit again this year, it is hoped that over a 3-5 year period, we will get back on track. Slow progress is being made regarding the Green Burial site and there are other windfall developments in the pipeline which will eventually lead to additional income.

Questions had been raised about the numbers of staff versus levels of service in the Café Bar and Nick had reported that we were trying to be more flexible in the way people worked. However, further investment would be needed to provide a better offer to customers to maintain the current level of visitor numbers. Nick felt that marketing and promotion work is a key area and is looking to get some professional input in this area.

It was confirmed that a dedicated Fundraiser will be recruited.

Nigel's report on the work of the volunteers had been circulated prior to the meeting. No questions were raised. The Chairman, Debbie Hassell, asked for thanks to be sent to the volunteers for their continued support.

In response to a question about the entrance to the park from Station Road, Nick said that, having spoken to the developer, work on the new entrance would be carried out when new culverts are laid in the road. Terry Ferguson asked whether the new entrance will include the continuation of the footpath at the end of the drive. Nick replied in the affirmative.

Flooding of footpaths, particularly around the Gap Wood area of the park, is of concern. Nick said that Central Beds. Council will soon be responsible for some paths under a new scheme and will share the cost of upgrades. It is hoped the problem will be remedied soon.

7. Any Other Business

Nick informed the meeting that the Trust had entered the 2015 Environment & Energy Awards and had been shortlisted in the Sustainable Business of the Year Category. The awards event will take place on 22nd April in Birmingham. We are up against some very prestigious opposition so to reach this stage is very encouraging.

Guy and Sam Hayden had recently attended an event at Wootton Upper School which had been very enjoyable and interesting to see how the young people were getting involved in the Forest Centre. Nick will be attending again to judge the final of the competition.

Nick reported that he had recently attended a conference and spoken to a senior DEFRA official who had shown a keen interest in visiting the Forest Centre.

Building of the new tower hide and walkway has begun. It will be opened officially on 1st June by the Lord Lieutenant of the County.

The Trust has received a donation of £200 from Center Parcs. Nick is in contact with the new MD who is keen to become more involved with us in the future.

David Wood reported that the Monday lunchtime learning sessions have been very good and have attracted lots of new faces to the Centre. He wondered whether we were capturing details, particularly e-mail addresses, of these visitors so we can keep in touch with them. Guy said that Sam is usually quite hot on getting information from people.

Via Guy, Sam sent her apologies for some recent late requests for volunteer help. She will try to do better in future. Discounts will be available for volunteers attending the brass band and folk music evenings.

Guy expressed his thanks to Joan, Nigel and Robin for undertaking the talks training. Some dates for talks have been received and talks will be advertised on the web site in future. If volunteers are members of other clubs or organisations looking for speakers, please ask Guy for further information. There is a charge involved.

One or two ideas were floated about how we can spend our money. Joan mentioned the idea of match funding any suitable projects. Bob Hook's project to put cameras into nest boxes and relay the pictures to the Centre was mentioned. Joan suggested paying for matting on the overflow car park. Guy will talk to staff to make them aware that there is money available for projects. If anyone has any other ideas, please discuss with Guy and/or the committee.

Guy raised the issue of communication with volunteers, particularly around specific tasks. He had spoken to Andy and Anna about how they recruit for their various tasks. They are always successful in getting people but agreed it can be difficult to manage. Their worry is that we get too many people on a given day. We need to have a system whereby everyone gets an opportunity to help, especially to allow newer volunteers to join in. Maybe a "first come, first served" system would work. Terry suggested that maybe new volunteers should be given first refusal. Andy asked how often events are over-subscribed. One way would be not to let people know where a task will be taking place, thereby making them ring in for further details. Once the correct number was reached, any remaining callers could be politely turned away. Another suggestion was that a three month rolling events list could be sent to all volunteers. This would require people to respond but a limit could be applied. Guy wondered whether this would put people off. He also wondered whether new volunteers are welcomed into the various groups. Would a buddying system be helpful for new volunteers? Graham wondered about meeting at the Forest Centre and travelling in convoy to the work site might work.

David Wood had recently worked on a task with a young man new to volunteering who had commented that there were no other young people. How can we encourage more youngsters to get involved? Would it be possible for volunteers to become involved with helping young people on the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme?

Spring Walk – Joan suggested a walk on 25th April 2015 to see the bluebells. Further information in due course.

8. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday, 5th May 2015 at the Forest Centre commencing at 7pm. The meeting closed at 8.15 pm with thanks to everyone for attending and for all their help.