

DELAMERE PUBLIC MEETING

DELAMERE FOREST

04.02.11

CHAIRMAN: Mr R Ackerley.

IN ATTENDANCE: Stephen O'Brien MP, Cllr J Grimshaw, Cllr A Needham, Cllr Ralph Oultram, Cllr A Dawson. 200+ members of the public.

Mrs S Pollard (Clerk).

1. The Chairman - welcomed everyone to the meeting. He also thanked our Eddisbury MP, Stephen O'Brien, who had made a special effort to be with us having only returned from a ministerial visit to Africa that very morning. He then made an introductory speech outlining the statistical performance of Delamere Forest.
2. MP Stephen O'Brien - thanked everyone for their commitment, stating that there was 'power in numbers' and that as the elected representative he was pleased to have the opportunity to be included. He continued that over the last two weeks he has received over 200 communications regarding Delamere Forest and that his intention now was to 'unearth what it is that we want to preserve and how to progress (with investment) in the future to maintain it'. That there was a need to 'protect' both access and a range of activities and the future plans to increase both. Biodiversity – forests represent a vital part of its future.
Mr O'Brien outlined the options for classifying the forest being as follows:
A Heritage Forest.
A Trust / Charity.
A Commercial venture.
He continued that the Government has to react to the problem of the Forestry Commission being both the 'regulator' and the 'supplier' of its business – is this right? The 'ownership' issue is crucial.
It is necessary to 'preserve and enhance' – access, amenities and maintain a balanced commercial woodland.
Mr O'Brien pointed out that this was not a new activity; the Forestry Commission has bought and sold land previously. The bottom line is that investment needs to be brought into the forest therefore being a public asset may not be the best way forward.
3. Public Forum.
Speaker 1.
Made the following observations; that the government consultation cover sheet should state not 'whether' but 'how'!
That within the 'Public Bodies Reform Bill' the 'Enabling Bill' will give ministers the right to sell off the forest.
That the forest as both 'regulator' and 'supplier' has been working very well as such for the best part of 100 years.

That to classify the forest as a 'Heritage' forest is to 'divide and conquer'; the Government is not the owners; the public are.

Speaker 2.

As leader of the Brownies and Guide groups stated that it was the people from the community, community strength and successful communities and committees that should decide. The Government should have no say.

Speaker 3.

Pointed out that there were various community activities available in the forest now, why can't they continue?

Speaker 4.

There is strong public opposition to this; half a million registered on a website petition. If after the consultation if there continues to be massive opposition will DC go along with public opinion?

Speaker 5.

Timber production – Forestry Commission = 40% woodland and produce 70% of the timber therefore = 1.75% efficiency. Other land holders own 60% of the woodland and have efficiency 0.5%. The figures speak for themselves.

Speaker 6.

Reminded everyone of the old adage 'if it ain't broke don't fix it'.
In future it may cost to access the forest.
'Heritage' status is for the likes of the Forest of Dean.

Speaker 7.

Ms Spelman has announced that this is 'nothing to do with money'.

Speaker 8.

On behalf of the equestrian users of the forest – If the forest is sold there may no longer be a riding facility. In the past permits were in operation that had to be paid for – bring them back?!

Speaker 9.

Rep of 'Ancient Bridleways' – this is not the Governments forest to sell – it's ours!

Speaker 10.

Rep of Cheshire Wildlife Trust – Delamere Forest is classified as a 'multi purpose forest' (for which there is no funding attached), not a 'heritage forest'. CWT has very limited resources; the classification needs to be looked at again.

Speaker 11.

The cut backs being proposed by the government are happening very quickly; the public sector reductions will impact on the police if there is civil unrest.

Speaker 12.

Permits were in place for many years and they did not work; access should be free for all. No higher rates for cyclists or riders. This would be up to the new owner to decide. A campaign fund was started in 1994 when the forest was last under threat. Money from that fund will be available for use in the current campaign.

Speaker 13.

There is a rumour saying that Centre Parks are going to buy the forest, if this is so how does this fit in with it being an SSSI?

Speaker 14.

Representative of an orienteering group. Orienteering events are not covered by C.R.O.W. legislation and therefore would no longer be permitted.

Speaker 15.

This speaker has long term experience of enjoying the forest with groups of underprivileged children. If access to the forest is lost it will be the children who suffer.

Speaker 16.

Employment in the forest and children visiting from schools are not covered in the C.R.O.W. legislation.

Speaker 17.

Rep of the Woodland Trust. Would like to see community groups managing the woodland. Found the 'tone' of the government a big worry. Noted that the British Waterways have already been made into a charity, if the Forestry Commission is also, how can they both possibly manage? The government needs to maintain them.

Speaker 18.

Highlighted a recent news item regarding Oxhead forest which has been privatized; there is now a problem with vehicle access – the gate has been locked! People have to climb over the gate – this a 'National Forest'.

Speaker 19.

'Can it be sold to someone who pays tax?'

Capital gains tax, inheritance tax..... There is your answer.

Speaker 20.

As part of Cheshire Search and Rescue we have used the forest regularly to train dogs and for fitness training. We are a big help to the police since their budget cuts. The forest is a crucial training facility and must be kept. Charities support the community – the government must help them.

4. Reply from Stephen O'Brien MP – stated that whilst he did not have all the answers tonight, he had made notes and he had listened. Mr O'Brien stated that the general principle as he saw it, was the question 'What is wrong with the current situation?',

'What is the intended benefit?' (of the government's proposal) also to consider 'if it ain't broke don't fix it'. He acknowledged that the government has an obligation to explain their motivation; this has been going on for a long time.

Mr O'Brien also made the following points:

As shown at Grizedale Forest there were not adequate protections in place to stop the 'locking of the gate'.

The government preserves and enhances activities, but can better models be found? Current ownership – the Forestry Commission; with a mandate and some funding.

Mr O'Brien was asked directly if he would vote for the privatisation of the forest? He replied that privatisation was only part of the consultation and that he would like to argue for 'Heritage' status.

Speaker 21.

Will we have a say in who the forest is sold to? Who owns the forest? The answer is the Crown owns it but it is managed by the Forestry Commission with a mandate to ensure access, amenity and mixed usage.

Ownership has been devolved down from the Crown to Parliament, therefore Parliament own the forest.

Speaker 22.

The Government is 'accountable'; private companies won't be, therefore we need it to remain with the Government.

There has been no opportunity to vote.

Speaker 23.

Who is going to carry out 'enforcement' should it be sold and gates and barriers go up?

Speaker 24.

In a consultation about change; should it not also include the question 'what is wrong with the status quo'?

Stephen O'Brien MP left at this point as he had to attend another engagement.

5. Cllr Andrew Needham (Chairman of P.R.O.W.).

Requested that everyone takes a more 'balanced' view; income from timber is small, there are already commercial aspects in the forest. Also suggested consideration should be given to private ownership 'enhancing' the forest.

Cllr Needham urged all to respond to the consultation document.

Speaker 25.

As of next week a website will be up and running, please visit 'savedelamereforest.co.uk'. Please log on and leave your comments that will become a permanent record.

Speaker 26.

Urged all to visit Stephen O'Brien at his surgery to back up this meeting.

Speaker 27.

The Forestry Commission Public Consultation Meeting is to be held on March 7th at the Fourways Inn. Call 01229 860373 to book a place. Or look on the website:

<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-8dfgg2.....>

Speaker 28.

Regarding the Forestry Commission accounts; is Delamere Forest profitable. I would like to see the accounts, can they be published?

6. Cllr Ralph Oultram.

Stated that Delamere Forest was 'special', with an area of benefit including Manchester, Liverpool, Runcorn and Widnes. The forest is the 'green lung' of the area.

7. Cllr Andrew Dawson.

This is to do with local democracy; please come to the CW&C council meetings to be held on 24/02 and 24/03 and show 72 Councillors how strongly your feelings are. Put pressure on all local representatives to respond.

Of all the 30 or more speakers only one (apart from Stephen O'Brien) spoke out in favour of the government's proposal.

At the end of the meeting the Chairman referred to the Consultation Document – which he had read. He stated said that nearly all of the fifteen questions at the end presupposed that the respondent was in agreement with the basic premise, ie that the forests should be sold or leased. As a result whether you agreed or disagreed with each individual question you would be implying that you were in agreement with the government's proposal. He went on to claim that the questionnaire was consequently fundamentally dishonest and gave no opportunity for anyone responding to voice his or her objections to the plan to dispose of the forests.

He warned everyone that, if they were to respond to the questionnaire, they should approach it with extreme caution.

8. The Chairman thanked everyone for attending the meeting and urged people to continue with the right to be heard on this issue. Finally he thanked the Clerk to Delamere Parish Council, who had voluntarily attended the meeting in order to take the minutes.

The meeting closed at 9.10pm.