

Malvern Hills Trust  
Covid-19 Contingency Committee  
By telephone conference call  
Meeting 27 March 2020 4.30pm

**Present:** Mr R Bartholomew, Dr S Braim, Mr M Cordey, Mr M Davies, Mrs C Palmer, Prof J Raine, Mrs G Rees, Ms S Rouse

**In attendance:** CEO, Finance and Administration Manager, Conservation Manager, Secretary to the Board

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

**1. Apologies for absence**

There were none.

**2. Declarations of interest**

There were none.

**3. Chair's announcements**

There were none. Comments sent in by 3 trustees had been circulated and were considered during discussion of the relevant items.

**4. Summary of actions taken in response to the Covid 19 pandemic**

The CEO went through his report. The Trust managed public access land, which was open at the present time and there was a continuing requirement for management. Non-essential outdoor work had been suspended and office staff were working from home except for one member of staff present at Manor House on a rota system. The office was closed to the public. Since his report was prepared, it had been decided that Field Staff should be on call rather than on site if there was no urgent work required. The play area at Colwall had been taped off as had the goal posts on the football pitch.

The Conservation Manager confirmed that winter scrub clearance work finished at the end of February so had not been affected. Conservation grazing was continuing as normal, supervised by the graziers as this was essential for animal welfare.

The Secretary to the Board said that it was essential to have a skeleton staff available to deal with anything requiring urgent action on the Hills. She had listened to a webinar run by the Trust's solicitors, covering the impact of the crisis on all aspects of charity administration.

The Committee was able to make its own administrative arrangements, including meeting by conference call, but she would look into the possibility of adding a video link if required. There was a brief discussion about the use of drones but it was concluded that this would not assist at present and required registration and a theory test.

**5. Summary of financial position**

The Finance and Administration Manager went through the paper. Loss of income from the car parks would be significant were restrictions to continue over the summer. The Trust had given notice to take £150,000 off the Lloyds 32-day notice account as a precaution.

Delivery of the work required under the current RPA administered grant schemes was not in jeopardy at present. The next seasonal action required would be bracken rolling in July.

The Conservation Manager confirmed that there had been no guidance on the effect of the pandemic from the RPA either on the operation of the schemes, delivery of work or deadlines for applications for new schemes. He would continue to work on the application for Countryside Stewardship for Castlemorton and the southern Hills with a view to submitting it by 1 May. It was suggested that the Trust raised these issues with Harriet Baldwin.

It was noted that at present there was no risk that MHT could not pay its debts as they fell due. It was agreed that if there was no greater clarity in one month's time on when the emergency would be over, the Committee should look at contingency planning and see regular cash flow forecasts. The Finance and Administration Manager would be able to report after the March month end what percentage of residents' car park permits had been renewed. It was suggested that the Finance and Administration Manager prepare financial updates for the Committee on a fortnightly basis.

The Secretary to the Board suggested that normal management reporting (for example management accounts and cashflow for Finance Administration and Resources ("FAR") Committee) should continue to this Committee. Management accounts would continue to be circulated to FAR Committee members as normal.

**6. To confirm the decision to temporarily suspend parking charges**

The CEO confirmed that, following a very busy weekend 21/22 March, in consultation by E-mail with the Committee, he had taken the view that parking charges should be suspended to prevent queues forming at the machines, compromising social distancing, and to eliminate as far as possible any virus transmission risk.

On the proposal of Mrs Rees, seconded by Mr Cordey, it was **RESOLVED** unanimously to confirm the decision to temporarily suspend parking charges.

**7. To confirm decision to suspend the issue of car park passes**

Trust was at present not charging for car parking, and both the library and the office were closed. The practical process of selling the passes was outside the Trust's capability. The validity of all existing passes would be extended to 31 May 2020. This would need to be reviewed depending on how the situation developed.

On the proposal of Mr Bartholomew, seconded by Dr Braim, it was **RESOLVED** unanimously to confirm the decision to suspend the issue of parking passes.

**8. To decide upon closure of Malvern Hills Trust facilities**

The CEO reported that St Ann's Well café and the toilets there were closed. At present Herefordshire Council were still managing the Wyche and British Camp toilets and they were open.

The issue of closing the car parks had been reviewed on a daily basis. The CEO now felt they should be closed. Many similar organisations had closed their car parks. The police were patrolling the car parks and asking people whether their journey was necessary, reflecting the Government's advice to only travel if it was essential. He was concerned that if the Trust car parks were open, it would attract people over the weekend, which he felt might lead to criticism of the Trust. He had discussed closure of the car parks with the police who said they would support any such decision. It was impossible to physically close off some of the informal car parks. In some instances all that could be done was to put up a notice.

Comments included:

- There was a risk people would probably park in other areas and on the verges

- Some people might still try to park on the car parks
- Wardens working alone should not attempt to enforce, but enlist the help of the police where necessary
- It was about giving a message rather than physically preventing parking in all locations
- Collecting water from the springs was probably not an essential activity, and should not be encouraged
- Consideration needed to be given to unauthorised parking when the bluebells were in flower

The CEO confirmed that if the Committee made the decision, the Community and Conservation Officer was ready to publicise the closure immediately on social media, the website and to issue a press release.

On the proposal of Mr Davies, seconded by Mr Cordey, it was **RESOLVED** unanimously to close the car parks.

The CEO and Ms Rouse left the meeting.

#### **9. Payment for staff absence**

The Finance and Administration Manager said that this was an unprecedented situation. Most staff were either working from home or working and were being paid normally. Colleagues who were self-isolating because of a family member were able to work from home. The Trust had existing provisions to cover staff taking unpaid time to care for dependants, and sick leave. There was a third scenario where staff who could not work from home had to self-isolate. The Committee **AGREED** to pay staff as normal during the three week lockdown. It was acknowledged that this was a fast moving situation and the Finance and Administration Manager was asked to advise further should it appear that the lockdown might go on for more than three weeks.

#### **10. Other matters**

In response to an E mail from one of the trustees, the Committee noted that arrangements for capital expenditure were specifically discussed at the Board meeting of 12 March 2020, and whilst the impact of any expenditure would be carefully considered, it was impossible to commit to make no capital expenditure over the next 12 months.

#### **11. Date of next meeting**

It was agreed to meet weekly for the time being. Next meeting Friday 3 April 2020 at 4.30pm (by telephone conference). The Committee gave a vote of thanks to all the staff but especially the CEO for his excellent foresight and leadership during this very difficult period.

**The meeting closed at 6.10pm**

Signed.....(Chair)

3 April 2020

**David Fellows**

In regard MHT and being on the FAR Committee and having been a partner in two businesses and a Director in another I have handled tens of millions of pounds worth of business in land transactions stock etc. and been conscious in all of Cost Control

Accordingly I propose that there should be NO Capital Expenditure for at least 12 months and no money spent on a Private Bill or advise for such for a similar period if at all.

A lot of businesses will struggle to survive this crisis and MHT may come into this bracket. I do hope that all will agree with me.

**Graeme Crisp**

In my view the Trust's reputation will be seriously damaged if it fails to follow the Government's requests articulated in recent broadcasts by for example Boris Johnson, that everyone who is not an essential worker should stay at home. The arrangements set out in Covid-19 Contingency Committee Meeting (telephone conference) papers fall well short of this standard.

When the special board meet by telephone I urge you and them to require all staff to work from home. If the Contingency Committee should choose not to do so, then they must ensure that all staff required to work other than at home are not in a vulnerable category, and are able to maintain social distancing at all times. The Trust, and we as trustees, have a legal obligation as employers to ensure that our workers are not place at any unnecessary risk.

I also urge the Contingency Committee to support government advice and approach to the emergency by minimising the opportunities for spread of the virus by doing everything they can to reduce crowding on their lands. The following comment on the Malvern Gazette web site highlights the problem: "Saturday it was busier than Christmas day. It was heaving. I turned around and left "

The Trust's governing documents may not allow closure of the hills , but there is no reason that the car parks should not be closed off to reduce the influx of people from outside the immediate area onto the hills. In my view this would be a sensible response to the Government's requests in recent days to maintain social distancing. Under the present circumstances, maximising access to the hills is not in the public interest. The National Trust has already take action to reduce access to their land.

This is a rapidly changing situation, and MHT needs to show solidarity with Government policy and advice and act now to protect everyone.

**Richard Fowler**

I accept that the car park charges should be temporarily suspended. However, an unintended consequence might be to encourage use of the hills to an extent that due to the numbers of visitors, particularly near car parks, compliance with the social separation edict, that we are all expected to achieve, is compromised. If another visit is required to the pay machines perhaps a posters could be affixed to them pay as a reminder. It is an individual responsibility but our action could be seen as encouraging more visitors albeit this was not the intention.