

<b>Report to:</b>	<b>Cabinet</b>
<b>Date of meeting:</b>	<b>27 January 2026</b>
<b>By:</b>	<b>Chief Operating Officer</b>
<b>Title:</b>	<b>The Conservators of Ashdown Forest 2025/26 forecast outturn position and updated medium term financial plan including the 2026/27 budget.</b>
<b>Purpose:</b>	<b>To present the forecast financial position as at the end of 2025/26 and the updated medium term financial plan, with the 2026/27 Core budget for approval.</b>

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**Cabinet is recommended to:**

- 1) note the Quarter 2 budget position for the Conservators' 2025/26 Core Budget.
- 2) note the Conservators of Ashdown Forest medium term financial plan.
- 3) approve the 2026/27 Core Budget.

## **1 Background**

1.1 This report sets out the financial position of the Conservators of the Ashdown Forest (COAF) for 2025/26 (Appendix 1), against the approved budget agreed by the Board of Conservators at their meeting on 17 November 2024 and presented to Cabinet in January 2025. Appendix 2 presents the COAF Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) to 2028/9.

## **2 Supporting information**

### ***Financial Year 2025/26***

2.1 The 2025/26 original budget set out a deficit budget of £15,620, being a surplus on the Core Budget of £9,106, and a deficit on the Countryside Stewardship (CS) budget of £24,726. At the end of September there is a forecast surplus of £176,033 in the Core budget.

2.2 Core budget expenditure and income are both higher than budgeted. This is mostly due to project expenditure and offsetting income. Projects include the Winnie the Pooh centenary celebration and the Strategic Access Management Measures (SAMMS). There was a capital purchase of a new vehicle, and this has been funded by donations. Income includes the receipt of the one-off contribution from the Ashdown Forest Trust as approved by Cabinet in September.

2.3 The current 2025/26 Core budget projections indicate that no additional contribution from East Sussex County Council (ESCC) will be required.

2.4 The current Countryside Stewardship (CS) budget is forecast to overspend by £88,589 this year. This is more than the budgeted overspend of £24,726. The forecast assumes a CS funding gap from January to March 2026. However Natural England have just announced an extension of the funding which should reduce the forecast 2025/26 overspend.

### ***2026/27 Budget and Medium Term Financial Plan to 2027/28***

2.5 The COAF 2026/27 budget and MTFP is shown at Appendix 2. There is a budgeted surplus in the Core budget. It is therefore unlikely that ESCC will need to make an additional financial contribution for that year. The Board was informed by the Rural Payments Agency that there would be a funding gap between the end of the current agreement and the start of a new agreement and the reported core budget deficits for 2027/28 and 2028/29 reflect that. The Board have now been informed that the current agreement has been extended. The organisation will take action to address

any remaining funding gap and it is unlikely that the 2027/28 and 2028/29 deficits will occur. CS has a budgeted deficit of £3,019 which reflects an increase in planned works for 2026/27. The CS deficit will be funded from the CS reserve.

2.6 The current CS programme has been extended to the end of 2026 with a new scheme likely to start from January 2027. The Conservators will apply for the replacement CS scheme when the government announce the funding schemes available. The CS expenditure and income streams included from 2026/27 are therefore indicative pending that announcement.

### **3 Conclusion and reasons for recommendations**

3.1 Cabinet is recommended to:

- note the Quarter 2 budget position for the Conservators' 2025/26 Core Budget.
- note the Conservators of Ashdown Forest medium term financial plan.
- approve the 2026/27 Core budget.

**ROS PARKER**

**Chief Operating Officer**

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#### **LOCAL MEMBERS**

Councillors Galley, Howell, Lunn & Taylor