

British Parachute Association

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THE COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting held on
TUESDAY 27 FEBRUARY 2001 at 1830
at the BPA Offices, 5 Wharf Way, Glen Parva, Leicester

Present: Chris Allen
Paul Applegate
Chris Clements
David Hickling
Ian Marshall
Ian Midgley - Development Chairman
Craig Poxon - Vice Chairman / Competitions Chairman
John Smyth

In attendance: Tony Butler - Technical Officer
John Hitchen - NCSO
Martin Shuttleworth - National Administrator
Lucie Wood - Development Officer

Apologies for absence: Tim Andrewes
Kieran Brady - Communications Chairman
Debbie Carter
Dona Crum
John Saunders
Lofty Thomas
Carl Williams

Observer: Helen Swallow

ITEM MINUTE

19/01 Purpose of this special meeting

The Chairman explained that he had called this special meeting to discuss the effect on UK Drop Zones of the control measures being put in place to combat the spread of foot and mouth disease in the countryside. The meeting had been convened without a formal notice or papers, purely to take advantage of the fact that many members of Council had already planned to be present for other meetings. He thanked those who were present, and noted that bad weather in the north or the short notice had prevented others from attending. It was not the Chairman's intention that any decisions should be taken today, rather that it should be a briefing session on possible contingency plans in case the epidemic became protracted. The Chairman apologised for this incursion on the time of the Competitions Committee meeting, the start of which would now be a little delayed.

20/01 The present situation

The Chairman summarised the present situation, with a number of Drop Zones having already closed because of the foot and mouth epidemic. These included Bridlington, Netheravon, Cornwall and Hibaldstow. The situation at Headcorn was being updated hourly and off landings were not a possibility at Hinton and Langar because of livestock in nearby fields. This was just a snapshot in time as the situation was developing day by day, and the BPA would continue to monitor it on a national basis.

It was to be hoped that the control measures the authorities were putting in place, together with the increase in average temperatures as spring arrived, would contain the spread of the disease and normality would soon be restored. However, the possibility of prolonged closure could not be ignored. It was the duty of the BPA, as the sport's governing body, to consider the effect of any extended closure of Drop Zones in terms not only of its likely effect on sport parachuting, but on the businesses of the Drop Zones themselves.

David Hickling reported that the situation had already become serious, and he believed that all Drop Zones would be likely to lose money. He considered it was important for Drop Zones to act in a way that maintained the goodwill of the local community of which they were a part. This meant responding to the very real concerns of farmers and landowners, which might require voluntarily suspending operations even though there might not, at least at that time, be a legal obligation to do so. Helen Swallow confirmed that Hibaldstow had volunteered to close earlier this week (including ceasing static line training) because neighbouring farmers were becoming nervous. Goodwill took years to build up in the rural community but could so easily be compromised, especially when the whole community was under stress as during the present crisis.

21/01 The effect of a prolonged closure on Drop Zones

David Hickling said that Drop Zones could be forced out of business by extended closure because they would simply have no revenue. This could prejudice the continuance of sport parachuting in the UK. Drop Zones had rates, rental of aircraft and wages to pay which for the larger centres probably amounted to something around £16K per month. Without some financial security, it was foreseeable that Drop Zone staff would first be laid off and, if the situation got no better, assets would be sold and the businesses wound up. He therefore asked the Council, in the event of any extended closures, to consider establishing a loan fund to provide BPA loans, repayable over a period of time, to which affected Drop Zones could turn for support. Most Drop Zones would have no other form of security.

There followed a discussion. It was recognised that an alternative point of view that some BPA Members might hold was that most Drop Zones were commercial businesses that had voluntarily entered into a business risk. However, the consensus that emerged was that the BPA should support its Affiliated Drop Zones through what could be a difficult period, as they were essential to the future of the sport. The Chairman re-iterated that he was not seeking decisions today, as there were too few Council Members present, but he urged all Members of Council to think carefully about how the BPA might help Drop Zones through any crisis. In order to generate further ideas, the Chairman would write to all UK DZ Operators to emphasise the importance of maintaining goodwill with neighbouring farmers and their local community in general, and to ask whether they had any suggestions of how the BPA might help them through the situation, as there could be other ways that had not yet come to light.

Action: Chairman

John Smyth said he would contact Jim Crocker, who was a BPA Vice President and Chairman of the RAeC Parliamentary Committee, to enquire whether MPs could be lobbied to help with any possibility of affected Drop Zones being included in the government's compensation package for farmers. He would also contact the RAeC to find out about the possibility of a concerted approach to the problem by all air sports.

Action: John Smyth

It was recognised that it would be unwise to pin too much hope on government compensation, not least because parachuting was but one of a range of outdoor recreational businesses that would be affected by the crisis, including angling, cycling, riding, trekking, etc. Even were some sort of government compensation to be a possibility, it might be a long and laborious process to claim it and Drop Zones would need earlier support.

22/01 Conclusion

In conclusion, the Chairman said that Drop Zones were used to weather closures for a week or so, especially during the winter period. However, if a DZ had to suspend its operations for say a couple of months or longer, especially if this extended into spring, then the BPA would be sharing a real problem with its Affiliated Drop Zones and a formal Council decision on David Hickling's request for a BPA loan fund to support DZs would become urgent. It would also be important to consider any other suggestions on how the BPA might be able to assist Drop Zones that might be made once he had written to all UK Drop Zones about the situation.

23/01 Date of next meeting

Tuesday 24 April 2001 at 1830 at the BPA Office, Leicester.

The meeting closed at 1855.