

MINUTES OF THE 920th MEETING OF
THE FORESTRY COMMISSIONERS
PRIVATE ROOM 2, RADISSON BLU HOTEL, BLOOMSBURY, LONDON
14TH DECEMBER 2017

Present

Sir Harry Studholme (Chair), Mary Barkham, Amanda Bryan, Ian Gambles, Julia Grant, George McRobbie, Jo O'Hara, Jean Lindsay

Also Attending

Simon Hodgson, Mark Street, Mathew Maguire (Items 6 & 7); Peter Nixon (Item 7); Fiona Alexander (Minutes)

1. Introduction and Apologies

The Chair opened the meeting and welcomed everyone to the meeting. There were no apologies.

2. Declaration of Interest

George McRobbie informed the meeting that he has been appointed Director of BSW Timber Limited, effective from 25 October 2017. Mr McRobbie highlighted the increased potential for conflict of interest and the meeting noted this and agreed that any potential conflicts of interest would be managed in line with Board guidance and protocols.

3. Minutes of 28 September 2017

The minutes were agreed as a true record subject to the inclusion of further detail on the discussion on Forest Holidays Refinancing (Para 7 of Minutes).

4. Matters Arising

There were three matters arising from the meeting of 28 September 2017.

i) Role of Chief Scientist

A draft specification and recruitment pack for the role has been developed with support from SASA (Science & Advice for Scottish Agriculture). Professor Gerry Saddler (Chief Plant Health Officer for Scotland) has offered to sit on the interview board and Professor Nicola Spence (Defra Chief Plant Health Officer) will be invited to join the interview board. It is anticipated that the recruitment exercise will commence after the Christmas break.

ii) Meeting with BBSRC

Mary Barkham and James Pendlebury will meet on 18 December to discuss this issue further and agree the most appropriate approach for seeking funding. The meeting noted that this would not address the issue of long-term funding for plant health research and that broader thinking in this area was required. The meeting heard that the Chief Scientist would be expected to look at research funding opportunities as part of their role.

iii) P.Ramorum in Wales

Defra are continuing to monitor the situation.

5. Forestry Governance Project Board

The meeting heard that the Ministerial statements issued on 7 November outlined the three governments' agreement for managing cross-border arrangements for forestry. There is still a considerable amount of work to be done in this area with much of the detailed information e.g. MoU's yet to be finalised and the meeting agreed that there was a need to help governments maintain focus and keep the momentum going. Within cross-border functions a number of changes are planned to take effect from 1 April 2018. For example, the cross-border Plant Health team management will move to England and CFS corporate services functions will transfer to Bristol. The cross-border working group is currently working on a timeline for the transfer of cross-border functions. The meeting agreed the actions taken to date and also agreed that clear and effective staff communications were vital to ensure clarity around the changes to ensure staff could fully understand what specific changes were taking place and when.

6. Forest Holidays Refinancing

The contents of this section have been withheld under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Part II Exempt Information s43(2) (disclosure would, or would be likely to, prejudice the commercial interests of any person)

7. Forest Holidays Board Report

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8. Staff Survey 2017

The meeting reviewed the results from Staff Survey 2017.

The response rate was 78% - a high rate, which implies the results are reliable. The FC scored an employee engagement score of 67% which compares well against the Civil Service, Scottish Government and Defra. On Capita's 'Employer of Choice' list the FC was ranked 116 out of 400. The survey showed where areas had improved since the survey of 2015 and where areas had deteriorated. Areas of strength for the FC included engagement, my work, my line manager, job plans and careers and, inclusion and fair treatment. Areas for improvement included pay and benefits, managing change, and leadership. The survey showed there were no significant concerns around work-related stress and the FC stress score compares well to others such as the Civil Service, Scottish Government, and Defra.

The meeting noted that because of their comparative scale, the FE Agencies have the biggest influence on survey results therefore it was important for individual areas to drill down into results to identify any issues at a local level and take appropriate action.

9. Independent Review of FR Science

The independent review of forest science was undertaken between 6 - 9 November by the Expert Committee on Forest Science (ECFS). Jean Lindsay and Roger Coppock met with the ECFS on the first day of the review. All Forest Research programmes were included in the review and initial feedback on the review has been good with the final report expected to be with FC before Christmas. The FC will respond to the report in January. Professor Julian Evans has agreed to present the report to the Commissioners at their meeting in March 2018.

10. Celebrating 100 years of British forestry

The meeting heard that a great deal of work had been done on this with a programme structure and a project team in place in England, significant progress in Scotland and ongoing discussions with Wales. There is an extensive outline programme for England which will be evaluated and prioritised before whittling down. The main themes of the programme are around resilience, well-being and expertise; familiar themes which will resonate with people and with public enthusiasm. The project team want to harness this and garner the interest of other partners. The central programme will comprise a range of projects - possibilities under consideration include a centenary book, TV series, staff stories, art in the forest, poetry, centenary woodlands (or similar), an extended apprenticeship programme and commemorative stamps. A budget for the programme in England will be set once 2018-19 allocations are complete in January. Publicising the programme and events beyond the FC will be important and the best ways of doing this are under consideration. The meeting felt it was important to join up with the whole sector where there is considerable interest and enthusiasm for the centenary celebrations. The meeting also recognised that there were a number of organisations and stakeholders that could input their ideas on celebrations to the programme. For example, Confor are actively developing their own programme and are offering a hub where people can publish and share what they are doing.

Action Point All Commissioners to consider how external organisations could be brought together to develop centenary celebration plans

11. Central Services Report

The meeting discussed the report and noted the following:

- i) A range of CPD training on various subjects had been provided by FR.

Action Point Jean Lindsay to check with James Pendlebury if training was provided to external organisations as well as FC staff

12. Scotland Country Report

The meeting discussed the report and noted the following:

- i) Stage 2 of the Scotland Bill concluded on 13 December with work still to be done for Stage 3. There was broad consensus for the Bill at Stage 2 with few

amendments carried. Discussions are on-going regarding a number of items including UKFS and organisational arrangements;

- ii) FES have proposed a reorganisation;
- iii) All recommendations from the Mackinnon report, except one, will be completed by end January 2018.

12. England Country Report

The meeting discussed the report and noted the following:

- i) The 25 Year Environment Plan is expected in January 2018. Defra have Cabinet agreement and are having final discussions with Treasury;
- ii) Two major woodland creation projects have been approved which provide for significant commercial planting in England. As the first such projects in a generation, there has been much to learn both for FC and for the wider sector in England; a 'lessons learned' report will be valuable for going forward. The Board agreed the woodland creation projects were good news for forestry.

14. Any Other Business

- i) Trustees of the Forestry Commission Benevolent Fund have agreed to dissolve the fund and transfer monies to the Civil Service Benevolent Fund at the end of March 2018. There will be no detriment to staff who will be informed of the decision and of the services of the Civil Services Benevolent Fund via a series of communications;
- ii) The Board reaffirmed commitment to health, safety, and well-being and the duty of care everyone has to themselves and to others. The FC has Operational Guidance Booklets in place including 'Driving at Work'.

15. Date of Next Meeting

21 – 22 March 2018 in Edinburgh. There will be no Tour on this occasion.