

MINUTES OF THE 918<sup>TH</sup> MEETING OF  
THE FORESTRY COMMISSIONERS  
EVA MEETING ROOM, ABODE HOTEL MANCHESTER  
29<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2017

Present

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

Also Attending

Roger Coppock (Agenda Item 8 via tele-conference), Fiona Alexander (Minutes)

**1. Introduction and Apologies**

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

**2. Minutes of 22 March 2017**

The minutes were agreed as a true record.

**3. Matters Arising**

There were two matters arising from the meeting of 22 March 2017.

i) Celebrating 100 years of British forestry

The meeting discussed the current development of ideas and plans for celebrating 100 years of British forestry. In England, dialogue has taken place with various external parties including The National Trust, Confor, and the Royal Forestry Society. As part of the celebratory events, the FC proposes to write a book on forestry in Britain and the meeting discussed how such a publication would look and the most appropriate content for it. In England, a team has been created to manage the project and pull the various strands together. A communications lead has just been appointed. Scotland confirmed they are beginning to develop their thoughts on the subject. The meeting also discussed how other external parties such as The Woodland Trust and Natural Resources Wales could be engaged in the celebrations. The meeting also noted the timings in relation to devolution of forestry in Scotland and highlighted the potential sensitivities around this.

**Action Point** Jo O'Hara to check with FC Scotland team to ascertain who is leading on this from FE Scotland

**Action Point** Amanda Bryan to contact the Lovat estate office to discuss the potential celebrations

**Action Point** Ian Gambles to provide Jo O'Hara and Amanda Bryan with a proposed outline of the centenary book as soon as possible so that Scottish participation can be considered, and with FC England's centenary key messages when available

ii) Meeting with BBSRC

Initial contact has been made with research colleagues in other organisations. The meeting was keen to ensure that the FC had a sound understanding and knowledge of the wider research environment, including relationships with organisation outside the UK e.g. Commonwealth Forestry Association, before approaching the BBSRC.

#### **4. HMRC Tax/VAT Compliance**

The meeting heard that the FC had recently met with HMRC to resolve the outstanding issues and it is hoped these will be concluded by 30 September 2017. With the full decentralisation of tax to the countries in 2018, it was vital that the countries were clear on their responsibilities with appropriate lines of management and control of financial issues. The meeting thanked Jean Lindsay and her team for their continuing hard work on manging this issue.

#### **5. Forestry Governance Project Board**

The meeting heard good progress had been made at the FGPB in May with officials agreeing proposals on a number of issues: Forest Research will continue as an Agency of the FC albeit with new governance arrangements; FC cross-border functions will be divided between England and Scotland - FC England will take responsibility for cross-border tree health functions, Scottish Government will take responsibility for economics and for Standards and Codes; Defra will take responsibility for international matters and new arrangements will be put in place for Research Commissioning. **All agreements are subject to appropriate Ministerial approval** and it is hoped that approval will be given by Autumn 2017 with many of the changes implemented by 1 April 2018.

The meeting discussed the need for FR to be able to shape its own work programme in order to secure delivery, noting that appropriate levels of funding would be important. To assist FR in achieving a stronger position going forward, the FGPB agreed that a piece of market research to explore potential external commercial opportunities and market growth relevant to FR would go ahead.

#### **6. Forest Research Corporate Plan**

The meeting reviewed the FR Corporate Plan and highlighted the need for FR to have a clear strategy for the Agency going forward which demonstrated vision and ambition. It is envisaged that new governance arrangements for FR will include increased external representation on the new Board and the meeting suggested that FR needed to be more proactive, develop new and more opportunities, expand their business development side with clearer strategy and objectives, and make themselves more robust and resilient. The meeting recognised the uncertainties currently faced by FR but felt that positive actions could be taken now to help them diversify and become more resilient for the future.

**Action Point** Jean Lindsay to feed back comments to Chief Executive, Forest Research

## **7. Equal Pay Audit**

The meeting discussed the Equal Pay Audit noting the steady decrease in the gender pay gap over the last 15 years – the gap now stands at 6.93%. The decrease in the gender pay gap has been slower than the FC would have liked but a two-year pay freeze and a five-year 1% pay cap have impacted adversely. Successive pay awards have helped to slowly reduce pay inequalities and the FC will continue to take appropriate action to ensure that the pay gap continues to reduce in the years ahead. The meeting also discussed the diversity issues facing the FC and noted how the FC could adapt its recruitment practices in city and urban areas to have more appeal to potential candidates from BAME backgrounds.

## **8. Plant Health Threats**

The meeting was given an update on recent plant health issues including the new outbreak of Sweet Chestnut Blight in London. The extent of the infection is not yet known and it is hoped that surveys of the surrounding areas will provide more information. It is hoped that pathogenic hypovirulence may lessen the impact of the disease.

The meeting heard that Acute Oak Decline continues to cause concern with current research looking into abiotic influences such as climate and soil, to support the large amount of work done on the biology of the causal agents.

The plans for implementing the new EU plant health regime are in preparation and working groups are considering how to best comply with the new requirements around, for example, plant passporting for bark and timber whilst reducing the burden on the sector. The recently introduced regulation on firewood imports has been successful with a good response from the sector. A good picture of the scope and extent of this trade is also being established.

## **9. Central Services Report**

The meeting discussed the report and noted the following:

- i) The National Tree Improvement Strategy was launched on 25 May;
- ii) A revised business case for Observatree has been agreed with partners. Phase 2 will be launched at a conference in September in Edinburgh;
- iii) It is anticipated that the UK Forest Standard will be published on 10 July;
- iv) Peter Freer-Smith (Chief Scientist) will retire from FR at the end of September. Options for filling the role are currently being explored;
- v) Finance functions will be decentralised by 1 April 2018; decentralisation of Information Services and systems will take slightly longer but will be complete by 1 April 2019;
- vi) A final settlement for Natural Resources Wales is under negotiation with Welsh Government;

- vii) Pay award continues to be capped at 1%. The FC pay remit has been submitted to Defra for Ministerial sign-off;
- viii) Staff Survey 2017 will be launched in September and for the first time will also include some country-specific questions to target different issues.

## **10. England Country Report**

The meeting discussed the report and noted the following:

- i) Upland forestry proposals in North England are under scrutiny. UK Ministers are keen to see new commercial woodland creation and it is hoped that applications will be forthcoming for commercial forestry schemes and that they will meet the necessary standards for approval;
- ii) England won a number of prestigious awards including awards for forestry construction and recreation;
- iii) A licence for seismic surveys in Sherwood will be agreed shortly.

## **11. Scotland Country Report**

The meeting discussed the report and noted the following:

- i) The Forestry and Land Management (Scotland) Bill was introduced in the Scottish Parliament on 10 May and is now under scrutiny by both the public and parliament. This stage runs to October 2017;
- ii) Proposed planting figures for 2018/19 are very positive but out-turn will depend on the sector to complete the planting. Increased grants for native planting in Highland have proved successful and sheep farmers are showing strong interest in the new packages available under the Forestry Grant Scheme;
- iii) A new Head of Strategic Development post is being recruited at PB1 to drive forward changes in the delivery of G&R functions and in particular some key recommendations for the Mackinnon report;
- iv) Use of chemicals to control weevils on Mull is under scrutiny with wider questions being raised with Ministers about chemical use in forestry.

## **12. Any Other Business**

- i) The Commissioners acknowledged the well-deserved award of an OBE to Emily Ramsay (former Head of Safety, Environment & Health) in the Queen's Birthday Honours.

## **13. Date of Next Meeting**

27 – 28 September 2017 to include a Tour in Scotland.