

MINUTES OF THE 917TH MEETING OF
THE FORESTRY COMMISSIONERS
CENTRAL BOARDROOM, SILVAN HOUSE, EDINBURGH
22ND MARCH 2017

Present

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

Also Attending

Roger Coppock (Agenda Items 9 & 10), Fiona Alexander (Minutes)

1. Introduction and Apologies

The Chair opened the meeting and welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were received from Jo O'Hara.

2. Minutes of 15 December 2016

The minutes were agreed as a true record.

3. Matters Arising

There were three matters arising from the meeting of 15 December 2016.

i) Letters of commendation to staff

Letters of commendation from the Commissioners, signed by Sir Harry Studholme, were sent to three members of staff in January. The letters were very much appreciated by the staff concerned.

ii) Letter of complaint – seed supply

A response has been provided to the complainant. The meeting discussed the different needs of the countries in terms of seed collection, storage, meeting demand for planting targets etc. and agreed that the FC required appropriate mechanisms to ensure sufficient quantities of seed were available.

iii) Celebrating 100 Years of British Forestry

The Chair has contacted the Duchy Private Secretary to draw attention to this event. The Chair will further consider the activities and events that should be highlighted in a letter to HRH Prince of Wales.

4. HMRC Tax/VAT Compliance

The meeting was advised of the progress made with the HMRC audits and heard that the Executive Board agreed that both Defra and Scottish Government (SG) needed to be sighted on the issues.

5. Forestry Governance Project Board

The meeting heard that there has been little progress with the FGPB since the Commissioners met in December. Agreement and decision by Ministers on the position of Forest Research and other cross-border issues is still required. The FC is proceeding with the devolution of Shared Services to the countries and Forest Research, albeit each is at a different stage in the process.

6. Outcome of forestry consultation in Scotland

The meeting heard that there was broad support for the process but concern was raised by a number of respondents about where forestry would sit in the new arrangements.

7. Future Options for Forest Research

Withheld under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Part II Exempt Information 35(1)(a) (formulation and development of government policy)

8. Natural Resources Wales Update

Withheld under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Part II Exempt Information 35(1)(a) (formulation and development of government policy)

9. Mobilisation of Research Funding

The FC is currently working with the sector on the National Tree Improvement Strategy and it is anticipated this will be launched in May. A Steering Group, co-chaired by industry representatives, will be established and it is hoped that the sector will take a lead role with the FC facilitating the process. Approx. 10-15 representatives from across the sector will be invited onto the Steering Group and it is hoped that the FC will provide some seed corn funding for this. Confor and ICF are to hold a meeting for key sector leaders in May to discuss the proposed funding model which proposes a range of strategies designed to provide support in different areas and draw funding from various sources. The meeting agreed the proposed model was good, providing a balance between structure and flexibility. The meeting also agreed that mobilisation of research funding was not just an FC concern but required input from SG, Defra and the private sector. There were opportunities to revise current practices e.g. modelling strategy to broaden their appeal to the private sector. Consideration was also needed on how to engage and empower the sector to fully participate in funding research; coupled with this was the need to ensure that industry gets what it wants from research. Other practices e.g. research commissioning required revision to ensure they are inclusive and workable and support the model. The meeting was advised that the proposed strategy would benefit from further streamlining to give the sector more management oversight over the various hubs, increasing the opportunity to tap into wider resources and industries.

10. Science & Innovation Strategy Update

The meeting was given an update on progress made with the Science & Innovation Strategy (SIS) and an assurance that the SIS was on track to deliver its commitments. A major step was the release of ForestYield, available as a download to industry. Next steps are to consider a modelling strategy for the next 10 -20 years. 38 projects for external research work have been commissioned in 2016/17 and across the research programme, 69% leverage was achieved from the budget. The SIS is now part of Defra's natural environment evidence strategy and will be embedded into their natural environment evidence planning. An external review of SIS impacts should be completed by the end of March and this will provide a useful measure of progress to date as well as feeding into the development of the next strategy.

11. Legal & Corporate Project

The meeting was given an update on progress made with the Legal & Corporate Project. The meeting extended their thanks to Jean Lindsay and her staff for their work on the project.

12. Central Services Report

The meeting discussed the report and noted the following:

- i) The draft business plan for Observatree was presented to the Executive Board;
- ii) The revised UK Forestry Standard is due to be published in April;
- iii) New corporate services are being developed in the countries. England anticipates it will be self-sufficient in April 2018 and assurance on this will be given over the Summer;
- iv) SEPA has moved into Silvan House. The EB will be discussing the future of the Silvan House lease.

13. Scotland Country Report

The meeting discussed the report and noted the following:

- i) The Forestry Grant Scheme budget has been increased by £4m;
- ii) £5m additional money has been allocated to timber transport;
- iii) The draft Climate Change Plan has ambitious targets for woodland planting and whilst there are many unknowns to contend with, there is generally good appetite and support from the sector;
- iv) National Committee Scotland discussed skills issues and the role of the FC in addressing these, as well as workforce planning.
- v) The process for the Mackinnon Report engaged well with industry and this was strongly welcomed by the industry however, some concern was expressed around the practicality of a few proposals e.g. accredited agents;

- vi) £3m investment by Napier University in a testing facility for timber and construction;
- vii) A successful visit from a Ukrainian delegation.

14. England Country Report

The meeting discussed the report and noted the following:

- i) The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee published its report 'Forestry in England: seeing the wood for the trees' on 21 March. The report made a number of recommendations to which Defra will respond. The meeting agreed that some of the report recommendations merited further discussion by the Commissioners once more detail of the proposals and the Government's response were available.

15. Any Other Business

- i) The Commissioners expressed their thanks to Liz Holmes and the Internal Audit team for their sterling work over many years.

16. Date of Next Meeting

28 – 29 June 2017 to include a Tour in the Manchester area.