

MINUTES OF THE 913TH MEETING OF
THE FORESTRY COMMISSIONERS
CENTRAL BOARDROOM, SILVAN HOUSE, EDINBURGH
17TH MARCH 2016

Present

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

Also Attending

Fiona Alexander (Minutes)

1. Introduction and Apologies

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

2. Minutes of 10 December 2015

The minutes were agreed as a true record.

3. Matters Arising

i) Restocking Figures

The meeting discussed the issue of land awaiting restocking. The Commissioners noted potential causes of time lags from felling to restocking, noting that felling rates have increased in recent years but information on restocking rates is not readily available. Work by the NFI team should provide more reliable restocking information by 2018. This will be the start of a rolling programme of information on the area and character of restocking. Commissioners noted that in the absence of reliable data, concerns in the sector were leading to unhelpful speculation, meaning that this was a high priority, and comms handling was particularly sensitive. These figures, when published, will allow an informed discussion of the subject.

4. Forestry Governance Project Board

The meeting heard that the Welsh Government has now joined the Forestry Governance Project Board (FGPB) which is considering a range of issues, including cross-border functions and finances. The FGPB has instructed the FR Oversight Group (FROG) to prepare an advice paper on the principles around governance, finance and accountability. Given the Scottish and Welsh elections in May, the meeting heard it was unlikely that any progress would be made until after the respective elections however, the FGPB was well-placed to move forward after May.

5. Forest Research Oversight Group

See 4 above. The meeting also heard that the Corporate & Forestry Support functions are currently being looked at in more detail. A sub-group of the BSG has been established to take this area of work forward and Terms of Reference for the group were agreed at their first meeting on 8 March.

6. HMRC Tax Compliance Audits

The meeting heard about the progress of the HMRC Tax Compliance Audit, noting the additional allocation of FC staff time to ensure this area of work is fully resourced and the appointment of advisers. The Forestry Commission continues to work through the VAT issues associated with business and non-business activities as well as a range of other detailed matters.

7. Role of Secretary to the Forestry Commissioners

The meeting was advised of the proposal to appoint Stephen Bennett as Secretary to the Forestry Commissioners. The Commissioners noted and agreed the appointment.

8. Equality & Diversity Update

The meeting was given an update on the diversity of the Forestry Commission workforce. The Forestry Commission has a legal requirement to publish an annual monitoring report and the current report includes additional monitoring information taken from the Staff Survey 2015. Despite downsizing in recent years, the Forestry Commission has managed to maintain the diversity of its workforce and reduce the gender pay gap. However, the Forestry Commission workforce remains predominately male, white and non-disabled. The meeting agreed that further work to attract a more diverse range of people was important in order to strengthen the organisation. Various strategies can be utilised to achieve this including focussing resources at a Forest District level to take account of local demographics; promoting and using promotional material from other forestry-related sources e.g. Institute of Chartered Foresters; utilising PhD research into perceptions of forestry. The meeting thanked Stephen Bennett and his team for their work in this area and for the monitoring report.

9. Science & Innovation Strategy Update

The meeting heard that the new research programmes are underway with some outputs already published. In addition, an electronic version of the 'yield model' will be published in April. The Forestry Commission continues to input into specific projects in order to gain benefits for forestry and whilst most of this work remains with the public sector, attempts are being made to engage more with the private sector on research funding. The Forestry Commission has digitised its archived material e.g. field reports, handbooks, technical publications etc. and these out of print publications will be made available in batches on the Forestry Commission website free of charge.

10. Deed of Trust – Forest Holidays/CITF

The Forest Holidays Governance Group met on 16 March to discuss the establishment of a 'Deed of Trust' which would address how Forest Holidays equity would be managed in the future. The meeting heard that this was a complex issue and legal advice has been sought.

Action Point Ian Gambles to provide an 'options' paper for the Commissioners' Meeting in June 2016

11. Central Services Report

The meeting discussed the report and noted the following:

- i) continuing threats to trees from pests and diseases;
- ii) an update on the Woodland Carbon Code;
- iii) Forest Research has received investment from Defra for specific capital projects;
- iv) new arrangements for HR Services, Procurement, and Equality & Diversity are on schedule for implementation in the countries/FR on 1 April. Business cases for Learning & Development, Safety, Health & Environment and Internal Audit are in preparation;
- v) discussions are continuing with Natural Resources Wales on additional costs.

Action Point Jean Lindsay to prepare a paper on plant health threats/pests for the Commissioners' Meeting in June 2016

Action Point Ian Gambles and Jo O'Hara to prepare a paper on plant health governance and management issues for the Commissioners' Meeting in June 2016

12. England Country Report

The meeting discussed the report and noted the following:

- i) the Forestry Innovation Fund has proved successful with approx. £150k disbursed to date to support preliminary planning for larger-scale afforestation projects via the Woodland Creation Planning Grant;
- ii) the Woodland Carbon Fund is currently in the planning stage and is part of wider government proposals for meeting carbon targets;
- iii) the reintroduction of Pine Marten in the Forest of Dean to control grey squirrels is a very positive development; part of the research will involve monitoring of predation on other wildlife.

13. Scotland Country Report

The meeting discussed the report and noted the following:

- i) a serious accident on the A82 project is under investigation;
- ii) the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill has passed Stage 3 in Parliament. The full implications for forestry are not yet known;
- ii) the Tree Health Strategy has been launched;

- iii) the nursery sector is facing difficulties due to a suppressed demand for broadleaves attributed to lower levels of planting during the transition to the new European program;
- iv) investment by Norbord in their Dalcross mill which will benefit timber processing in that area.

14. Any Other Business

The Commissioners expressed their thanks and gratitude to Mr Keith Oates for his work as a Forestry Commissioner over the last three years.

15. Date of Next Meeting

16 – 17 June 2016 to include a Tour of the Knepp Estate, West Sussex.