

MINUTES OF THE 912TH MEETING OF
THE FORESTRY COMMISSIONERS
PRIVATE ROOM 1, RADISSON BLU EDWARDIAN, LONDON
10TH DECEMBER 2015

Present

Harry Studholme (Chair), Mary Barkham, Amanda Bryan, Ian Gambles, George McRobbie, Keith Oates, Jo O'Hara, Wilma Harper, 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 1 October 2015

The minutes were agreed as a true record.

3. Matters Arising

i) HMRC VAT Audit

The meeting heard that work to identify priority and high-risk issues continues. Access to external advice and other departments facing similar audits has been improved. The current focus at the moment is on exploring the treatment of exempt and non-exempt business activities for the purposes of VAT.

ii) Forest Holidays Board Appointment

Mr Peter Nixon has been appointed as the Non-executive Director to represent Forestry Commission interests on the Board of Forest Holidays.

4. FC Going Forward

The meeting discussed the future operating requirements for Forest Research and agreed a number of principles for Director Central Services to feed into the next meeting of the Forestry Governance Project Board Forest Research Oversight Group as the representative of the Board.

5. Staff Survey 2015

High-level results from the 2015 Staff Survey were presented to the meeting. The survey achieved a response rate of 62% (an increase of 6% from 2013) whilst engagement had reduced from 74% in 2013 to 71%. This was still seen as

encouraging given the recent periods of uncertainty and significant change in the organisation. The workplace stress score was also noted and the meeting agreed that this was acceptable given where the FC currently is. The meeting agreed that there was no room for complacency and the FC would continue with monitoring and appropriate interventions.

6. Health & Safety Update

The meeting was updated on the work undertaken during the year to continue to improve health and safety in the FC. During 2015, the Safety Climate Tool was run across the whole organisation and achieved a 70% response rate. The results showed that staff had good commitment to the organisation and had trust in organisational health and safety. Some areas received less favourable feedback and actions have been identified to improve the areas of weakness.

Accident and incident reporting has highlighted that the FC has four main health and safety issues that require improved management. These are: working with chainsaws; slips and trips; electricity; and tick-borne diseases. The meeting heard about actions taken to improve management in these areas.

The meeting noted that, in common with other shared services, a proposal on how to move the Health and Safety function out to the countries is under development. The meeting agreed that for Health and Safety in particular, it is important for all parts of the organisation to retain their focus on health and safety and that robust structures are put in place.

7. Central Services Report

The meeting discussed the report and noted the following:

- i) a report of the recent 14th World Forestry Congress;
- ii) a formal process to ensure safer working for plant health inspectors and regional managers working in ports;
- iii) Forest Research and the Environment Agency are assessing the economic value of woodlands in relation to flooding;
- iv) the refreshed Forest Research project is on track for implementation on 1 April 2016. The meeting congratulated Director Central Services and her team for their hard work on this;
- v) negotiations have commenced to discuss additional costs for Natural Resources Wales;
- vi) the FC Graduate Programme continues with an intake of three new starts during 2015. The meeting noted the reduction in mid-year placements for forestry students.

8. England Report

The meeting discussed the report and noted the following:

- i) technical difficulties with CAP computer systems have impacted on Countryside Stewardship, both on customers and on staff. Despite this, the quality of applications is good. The strategy of targeting schemes is working well;
- ii) the first stage of the Forestry Innovation Fund, announced at the Forestry Forum on 15 October by Ministers, will provide funding for preparatory work for medium – large woodland creation schemes;
- iii) Commissioners recorded their appreciation for Ben Jones, Tree Health Ops Manager, who was recently named 'Inspirational Line Manager of the Year' in the Civil Service Awards;
- iv) appreciation for the work of everyone involved in the recent floods in Cumbria.

9. Scotland Report

The meeting discussed the report and noted the following:

- i) the contribution of forestry to the economy in Scotland has been widely reported, achieving good media coverage;
- ii) the consultation on Land Use Strategy is now on-line;
- iii) the exercise to recruit Non-executive Members for the National Committee for Scotland has now concluded. The Minister will select two appointees from the list of appointable candidates.

10. Any Other Business

i) Mr McRobbie informed the meeting of a perception within the industry that the area of land awaiting restocking is increasing and has raised concerns about this. The meeting agreed that clarification was required to establish the reality of the situation with detailed figures on what is in fact occurring before it would be possible to respond.

Action Point Wilma Harper to investigate and clarify restocking figures with Head of Inventory, Forecasting & Operational Support

ii) The Chair advised the meeting that a recent i-Tree survey of approx. 8.4 million trees in London assessed their value to society at £43.3 billion with a replacement value of approx. £6.1 billion.

iii) The meeting was reminded that the centenary of the Forestry Commission would take place in 2019 and there appeared to be a variety of proposed activities in the pipeline. The meeting agreed that a co-ordinated approach recognising that there were sensitivities around changes to the Forestry Commission and to forestry more generally was required with appropriate input and debate. The meeting agreed to discuss this more fully at their meeting in June 2016.

iv) The Chair and Commissioners conveyed their thanks and appreciation to Wilma Harper on the occasion of her last meeting as Secretary to the Forestry Commissioners.

11. Date of Next Meeting

16 – 17 March 2016 in Edinburgh.