

19 March 2015

Science and Innovation Strategy for Forestry in Great Britain - update

1. Purpose

To provide an update for Commissioners on progress towards delivering the Science and Innovation Strategy for Forestry in Great Britain (SIS).

2. Background/Introduction

The SIS is the key document which sets out areas where there is an agreed collaborative approach to science and evidence across the 4 countries of the UK. The resources for its delivery are part of the Forestry Commission's Westminster funding. Its development and delivery has been planned in three phases. Phase 1 involved the complete review of the strategy in partnership with country policy leads and in consultation with stakeholders. This was concluded in March 2014, when the SIS was formally launched by Sir Mark Walport, the UK Government Chief Scientific Advisor. Phase 2 is the process of developing a set of new research programmes to deliver the strategy through a combination of Forest Research (FR) (90%) and external providers (10%). Phase 3 is the delivery phase, which will commence at the start of the new financial year. The process is on track to meet this timescale.

3. Details

Developing the new research programmes has been the focus since last March. It has involved a series of well attended workshops across the UK, which engaged a wide range of stakeholders, both across government and the forestry sector. Country administrations provided details of their critical research questions and these were incorporated by the CFS analysts into a brief for Forest Research to respond to. This resulted in seven new interdisciplinary programmes of research, which were subject to considerable consultation with country colleagues in their development. The timescale made this a challenging exercise for all concerned, but the draft programmes have been delivered on time. A similar brief is being finalised for the research commissioned from external providers, which complements the FR programmes, and will add capacity and expertise where this is not available in house.

The FR programmes have been sent to the members of the Expert Committee on Forest Science for peer review, and their comments will be addressed in preparing the final programmes. Peer review of the programme proposals has not been undertaken before, but it will provide a valuable independent perspective on the proposed research, which is in line with Government guidelines on research procurement.

As the process of research commissioning is quite different to the way it has been done previously, we are using 2015/16 as a transition year. This will allow some legacy work to be completed, and will enable the programmes to respond more flexibly to potential changes in resource allocations.

4. Resource Implications

Despite significant reductions in budgets during SR10, we have managed to leverage CFS research funding with other partners to maintain overall research capacity at 2009 levels. This includes FR partnered EU projects and cross government ones such as the Tree health and Plant Biosecurity Initiative. Collaboration has proved to be an effective way of stretching the core Westminster funded resource, and the new science programmes will continue this.

At this time, the resources for 2015/16 are similar to 2014/15, with just a very small and easily manageable reduction. This provides a solid foundation for the new programmes to commence, and a good baseline for future finances. We have worked closely with financial colleagues to achieve this, and their supportive approach has been instrumental.

There are no indications as to levels of funding beyond 2015/16, and this will depend on the outcome of SR15. The Cross Border business plan has in-built flat line assumptions for future research spend although we have also done some scenario analysis to consider likely impacts of SR15. Should further reductions be required, the Research Strategy Management Board will need to consider how best to apply them.

5. Risk Assessment

The Cross Border risk register identifies '*evidence to support the sustainability of GB forests detrimentally impacted through lack of resource or capacity*' as a key (Red) risk. A number of mitigation controls have been identified to reduce the risk to Amber status. However, these relate mainly to ensuring capacity and capability. Should this be impacted by further resource reductions, then the residual risk will need to be revisited to assess if the FC's ability to provide the evidence base required for policy development and operational practice will be compromised.

6. Communications Issues

The new research programmes, once finalised, will be published on the internet, and available for all stakeholders to view. Stakeholders were made aware during the SIS consultations that it was unlikely that all of their aspirations for the strategy could be met. However, the programmes which have been developed will go a long way towards meeting these, if not immediately, then over the next 4-5 year life of the strategy.

We are positioning the SIS programmes as a proxy Defra Network Evidence Action Plan to increase their visibility across the Defra network, and highlight opportunities for further collaboration. Similarly, we are having useful discussions with the Scottish Government about improving the level of integration of the SIS with their Rural and Environment Science and Analytical Services research programme. Both the Welsh Government and the

Northern Ireland Forest Service are members of the Research Strategy Management Board, and they view the SIS as key to providing much of their forestry related research.

We are currently in discussion with Defra over the interpretation and application of 'Smarter Guidance'. This exercise is aimed at significantly reducing the amount of guidance provided to the public, specifically advice on good practice. The aim is to reduce guidance by 80%. Our view is that all of the Forestry Commission's guidance supports the UK Forestry Standard (UKFS), which clearly sets out the legal and good practice requirements for forest and woodland management. These requirements are driven by UK legislation and international commitments on forestry. The UKFS has been highlighted by ministers as an effective form of voluntary regulation but is also now being examined for reduction. Discussions with the devolved administrations and some external stakeholders, such as Confor and ICF, have concluded that the guidance is essential to how they practice forestry, and must continue to be available in some form.

Until the outcomes of SR15 are understood, there are no more significant communications issues.

7. Implementation and Evaluation Proposals

The new programmes will be presented to the Research Strategy Management Board at the start of April for approval. The process above has been designed to ensure that the RSMB is not presented with any surprises at the meeting. Once agreed, FR will start to deliver the programmes, which will be complemented by the Corporate and Forestry Support externally commissioned research.

The SIS sets out the process which will be followed for evaluation. Programmes will be evaluated internally on an annual basis to ensure they remain realistic and on schedule. There will be a triennial evaluation of impact for the strategy as a whole, which will be independently conducted, and a five yearly independent review of Forest Research to assess science quality. This is in line with the government's recommendations on science commissioning. In addition we will be seeking stakeholder feedback via social media tools on their perception of the value of the science delivered under the strategy. These qualitative assessments will be combined with quantitative ones, as outlined in the SIS, to provide a clear picture of the science which the strategy is delivering, and the impacts it is having on policy formulation and operational practice.

8. Recommendation

That Commissioners note the progress towards delivering the SIS.

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