

**FORESTRY COMMISSION ENGLAND
EIGHTY FOURTH MEETING OF THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE
NATIONAL OFFICE BRISTOL
2 FEBRUARY 2017 AT 12.30hrs**

Minutes

Present:

Sir Harry Studholme (Chairman)
Mary Barkham
Ian Gambles
Julia Grant
Richard Greenhous
Simon Hodgson
Steve Meeks
Mark Pountain
Margaret Read

Also present:

Sonia Phippard, DG Environment, Rural & Marine Group (Defra)

Jenny King – Agenda Item 5
Claire James – Agenda Item 7
PK Khaira-Creswell – Agenda Item 8
Hayley Skipper – Agenda Item 8

Richard Barker - Secretary and England SIRO

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting, and introduced Sonia Phippard, Director General Environment, Rural & Marine Group Defra and Margaret Read, interim replacement for Tom Surrey, standing in for Shirley Trundle who had sent her apologies. Clive Tucker also sent his apologies.

2. MINUTES OF THE MEETING ON 9 NOVEMBER 2016

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed as a true record.

3. MATTERS ARISING/UPDATES

Select Committee Inquiries

Ian Gambles advised the Committee that he had appeared before the Efra Committee to answer questions as part of the forestry inquiry. There had been positive

engagement and the Committee had now completed its evidence gathering process and was working on its report. It was expected to publish its report before Easter and there would be a response from Government within 60 days.

The Environmental Audit Committee published its Report on the future of the natural environment after the EU Referendum on 4 January. Although the Forestry Commission had submitted written evidence and given oral evidence there were no forestry specific issues in the Report.

25 Year Environment Plan

Sonia Phippard advised the Committee that publication of the consultation document (Green Paper) was imminent. Plans for public engagement included large open events followed up by smaller more focussed events where key stakeholders would be invited. The work would need to align with the food and farming plan. The delay in publication of the Green Paper was expected to have a knock on effect on the tree health resilience plan process.

The Chair noted the potential role for the FWACs in the consultation process and he encouraged everyone to help motivate people to become directly involved in the consultation.

Plant Health

An update briefing had been provided with the meeting papers and Richard Greenhouse reported that the only significant development not in the update was the discovery of further individual trees with Sweet Chestnut Blight in North Devon. This had been found as part of the trace forward work and was not unexpected, further discoveries were likely.

The Chair noted that the relevant nursery and landowners who had been cooperative and suggested that we should, subject to Richard Greenhouse's advice on timing, write to express our thanks.

4. FINANCE REPORT

Paper 01/17

Steve Meeks drew the Committee's attention to the approved budget position which showed the variances signed off by Defra ExCo (paragraph 3) and the items pending (paragraph 4). The most significant pending item was the additional depreciation relating to the capital investment at Alice Holt, which was not expected to result in an increased asset valuation.

The Committee noted the contribution to Operation Oak, which the Chair explained could help draw in third party funding, an essential element in supporting forestry research into plant health and in this case oak research. It was good to see the range of organisations working together for the benefit of both the species and the sector.

Ian Gambles gave an additional update on ongoing discussions with HMRC over the VAT Audit. This still had some way to go and the final outcome remained

unpredictable, but the Forestry Commission was confident in its position and would defend it robustly.

Business Planning

Steve Meeks reported that finalisation of the budget allocation for 17/18 was almost concluded along with an indicative allocation through to 19/20. Once confirmed the internal split of the allocation could be concluded and the business plans updated. Once this process had been achieved, expected to be by the end of February or early March, the Business Plans would be sent to the Committee for clearance by correspondence.

5. CORPORATE PLAN

Paper 02/17

Jenny King joined the meeting and explained the approach and background to the plan preparation, which was broadly similar to the current year's Plan. The Action Plan, submitted to Defra with the other ALBs for internal use, would be aligned with the delivery of the objectives in the Corporate Plan.

During the discussion it was noted that the Corporate Plan was unlikely to be produced once full separation had been achieved and central services had been devolved to the countries.

The Committee welcomed the progress that had been made and made number of observations and comments, which would be taken into account in the next iteration. The next stage was for the current draft, subject to minor amendments, to be shared with officials in Defra. Following this all outstanding comments would be carefully considered and a near final draft produced for Ministerial endorsement. The Committee was welcome to submit any further comments they had after the meeting. It was expected that the finished Plan would be published in June.

6. FC FUTURE OPERATING MODEL

Paper 03/17

Ian Gambles ran through his presentation, which had been sent out with the meeting papers, adding additional background information on the case for change and constraints. Of particular significance were the timing of events in Scotland and the need to address uncertainty for staff. It was also clear that there would not now be any primary legislation on forestry in the current Parliament.

The Future Operating Model aimed to simplify governance and how the organisation operated, building on the separation of Forest Services and Forest Enterprise that was currently underway. The Committee was invited to consider the proposal and the draft Future Operating Model and reflect on these issues before send their comments after the meeting.

In the discussion following the presentation the Committee expressed broad support for the proposals and raised a number of issues for further consideration including the need to retain a strong forestry skill set and for this to be fully recognised and integrated within Defra, wherever it was located. There was some concern that there

could be a lack of joined up thinking and action if there was too much separation between Forest Services and Forest Enterprise. There also needed to be some clarity of brand in any future arrangements so that both staff and stakeholders had something to identify with.

Simon Hodgson explained that Forest Enterprise was aiming to achieve something as close as possible to what may have been achieved with legislation but any arrangement would need to be sufficiently robust to stand up to legal challenge and provide long term stability.

Richard Greenhous explained that it was essential to maintain the most valuable parts of the organisation, which was the specialist expertise. He added that below senior management levels, for example in the regions and districts the governance arrangements made little difference to their day to day operational activities.

Ian Gambles recognised the importance of good communication with staff on development of the Future Operating Model and subsequent implementation plans.

The next step was for Committee members to send their additional thoughts and observations to Ian Gambles by Friday 17 February.

7. HEALTH AND SAFETY REPORT

Presentation

Clare James, Head of Health and Safety and Technical Training was welcomed to the meeting. It was noted that Clare had recently joined Forest Enterprise in this new role as part of the devolution of Central Services.

Clare gave a presentation setting out how Health and Safety in England was being managed and the current and recent activities. Staff and visitor accident figures in the year to date and from previous years were also presented.

The Committee was concerned by the average number of days' absence per person and noted that a significant proportion of this was due to long term issues. It was explained that this had already been recognised by managers and that sick absence management was being improved, including increasing support to help to reduce long-term absence.

The importance of recording both visitor accidents and near misses which were critical to identifying problem areas was acknowledged. Improvements to data capture were continuing and would be used to help identify areas of concern and shape future plans.

The Committee thanked Clare for her report and confirmed its support for the programme of continuing development and the reinforcement of the safety culture across the organisation. The Committee considered whether or not a six monthly update was adequate and concluded that this should be given further consideration by Simon Hodgson and the Committee updated at the next meeting.

8. CENTENARY PLANNING

Presentation

PK Khaira-Creswell and Hayley Skipper were welcomed to the meeting. PK gave a presentation on the ideas that were being considered to celebrate the centenary. This was based around a cultural programme connecting people with trees and being as forward looking as much as it was reflecting on 100 years of achievement. Key to achieving many of the ambitions was the ability to attract funding and sponsorship and this was currently being explored.

Hayley Skipper continued the presentation by highlighting a range of recent events that provided inspiration on how people can become engaged and involved in cultural events. These provided inspiration to draw on in the centenary planning process.

The Committee supported the ambition shown and agreed that the Commission would need to make a financial commitment to core funding the development of the project, but also recognised that this had to be proportionate and that external funding was crucial for achieving the scale of events being considered.

It was agreed that the Committee should receive regular updates and continue to be involved in the planning and delivery process.

9. FE STRATEGY BOARD REPORT

Oral

The Chair reported key issues from the morning's FESB, including the review of risk, finance, including income and the capital programme. There had been considerable improvement on achieving value for money from the capital investment programme, both in terms of meeting the organisations needs for long-term income generation and the needs of the customers.

10.FOREST HOLIDAYS and CAMPING IN THE FOREST

Paper 04/17

The Committee noted the update and were advised by Simon Hodgson that the site selection process was now working effectively. Camping in the Forest was doing well, but continued to be influenced by the weather. Work was ongoing to diversify the business away from the challenging operating environment of the New Forest.

11.LATCHMORE WETLAND RESTORATION SCHEME

Paper 05/17

The Chair gave some additional background to the issues surrounding the planning application, which was narrowly rejected by the Planning Authority. It was noted that without the support of the HLS Board to fund an appeal the Forestry Commission was left with no option than to accept the decision. The concern for the condition of the SSSI remained., however, the Committee endorsed the local management decision not to appeal.

The Committee recognised the massive investment in time and effort that had been made by the local team and the personal impact of the determined opposition, which had not always been based on the true facts of the case. The Committee expressed its appreciation for the efforts made to do the right thing and would continue to support the work on alternative restoration projects.

12. AOB

Non-Forestry Developments

Ian Gambles updated the Committee on the background to recent press reports in connection with seismic surveying work being planned in the north Nottinghamshire area, including Sherwood Forest. It was noted that the company concerned has a Government licence for its activities and that facilitating onshore oil and gas exploration was Government policy. Ministers were being consulted to confirm that normal decision-making processes for non-forestry developments should continue to apply.

FWACs – Public Bodies Classification

The Committee agreed the proposal, first brought to the meeting with the FWAC Chairs in November, to seek their reclassification from Advisory NDPB to Expert Committee. It was noted that this was an administrative issue that had no impact on the role and value of the Committees.

Framework Document

Steve Meeks advised the Committee that Defra Framework Document was almost complete and when finalised would be shared with the Committee.

No other business was raised.

Next Meeting: 12 April in Bristol (after the FE Strategy Board)

1 June in Bristol (after ARAC)