

**FORESTRY COMMISSION ENGLAND
NINETY THIRD MEETING OF THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE
NATIONAL OFFICE BRISTOL
12 JULY 2018 AT 12.30hrs**

Minutes

Present:

Sir Harry Studholme (Chairman)
Mary Barkham
Ian Gambles
Julia Grant
Richard Greenhous
Fiona Harrison
Simon Hodgson
Steve Meeks
Mark Pountain
Clive Tucker

Also present:

David Cross – Item 7

Richard Barker - Secretary

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting. Shirley Trundle had sent her apologies and Fiona Harrison was attending. Steve Meeks had sent his apologies.

2. MINUTES OF THE MEETING ON 7 JUNE 2018

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

3. MATTERS ARISING/UPDATES

Annual Report and Accounts

The Committee noted that the Accounts had been laid on 21 June and congratulated all those involved.

Sheffield Street Trees Programme

Richard Greenhous updated the Committee on the investigation into whether or not any of the tree felling in Sheffield had taken place without a felling licence when a licence would have been required. This was a challenging investigation which was being carried out carefully and methodically against a background of strong views and

opinions being expressed on all sides. It was important for the Forestry Commission to maintain its independence and impartiality as regulator. The work was not yet complete and no conclusions could be reached at this point. The Committee made a number of observations on the investigation work that was being carried out, which would be given further consideration by Forest Services.

The Committee went on to discuss the wider implications of the case and how local authorities approached tree management. It was recognised that there were limitations to the application of the Forestry Act in urban areas, especially where any local authority took an aggressive approach to tree felling. However, this had to be balanced against the public pressure on local authorities to maintain their trees rather than fell them at the first sign of a problem. The Committee concluded that the Forestry Commission should continue to promote the alternatives to removal when practicable. The forthcoming urban tree manual may provide one opportunity to do so.

4. FINANCE REPORT

Paper 18/18

Ian Gambles introduced the report noting that it was too early in the year to draw any conclusions from the indicative forecast. Ian drew attention to the prospect of a Spending Review next year. It was noted that it would be important for the Forestry Commission to identify its own priority outcomes for the review process; these would need to be in place before the end of the year.

5. CONSULTATION ON ENVIRONMENTAL PRINCIPLES AND GOVERNANCE AFTER EU EXIT

Paper 19/18

Richard Greenhous highlighted the key elements of his proposed response to the consultation. The need for the proposed new body was essentially to replace the EU's current oversight of environmental regulation. It was not intended to replace any existing domestic regulatory authority. The Committee made a number of suggestions and concluded that the response should not make general comments on the proposals and should focus only on forestry and Forestry Commission specific issues. The Committee also agreed that Richard Greenhous did not need to refer back to the Committee before submitting the Forestry Commission's response, but it should be agreed with Ian Gambles before submission.

6. REGULATION OF FE BY FS

Richard Greenhous explained that the revised proposals for the regulation of FE by FS had taken a long time to develop and were now at a stage where they could be implemented, subject to annual review and, where necessary, refresh. The Committee welcomed the intention of the revised process to place the regulation of FE on a broadly equivalent basis to that of other woodland owners, whilst recognising that this was a voluntary agreement as there was no legal requirement for FE to apply for felling licences, and that the Forest Plan approval process used by Forest Enterprise was not available to other woodland owners and managers.

The Committee made a number of suggestions for amendments, to be implemented as soon as possible, but agreed that these should not delay the commencement of the revised approval process described in the paper considered by the Committee. These suggestions included revising Section 11 (Felling without approval) to strengthen the sanctions that could be applied to FE, for example if it was found that felling had taken place without approval then a warning letter would be issued, and that this would be reported to the relevant certification bodies.

The Committee also agreed that the Practice Delivery Note should be subject to annual review by the Committee, together with information on any issues or escalated disputes that had arisen out of the approval process.

7. CORPORATE PLAN PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Paper 21/18

David Cross joined the meeting and highlighted the key elements of the report, in particular the importance of the indicators that had been in place long enough to show trends over time. It was noted that whilst there was a net loss of woodland in 2015-16 of 556 hectares, over a four year period there had been an overall net gain of 5,489 hectares. The Committee took particular interest in the percentage of the annual increment that was being harvested, especially in broadleaved woodland, which showed the scope for increasing utilisation. The Committee was also concerned by the apparent dip in PAWS restoration and asked for more information to be provided on this issue.

It was noted that Forest Services Senior Managers would be considering the indicators at their September meeting when they would look at what actions could be taken to help improve performance as well as the relevance of some of the indicators. The Committee was keen to ensure that the indicators remained relevant and agreed that the new Governance being implemented as part of the Future of the Forestry Commission should consider future performance indicators alongside any changes as a result of the 2019 spending review outcome.

8. FESB Update

Mark Pountain gave a brief update on the morning's FESB meeting. Points of note were the ongoing performance of the timber market and the slight drop in visitor numbers compared to the previous year when there had been a big push with the Gruffalo promotion. It was reported that the migration of central services with the new HR IT and Finance systems was largely going to plan, with no major issues.

9. FWAC CHAIR REAPPOINTMENTS

Paper 22/18

The Committee approved the re-appointment of the FWAC Chairs as set out in the paper without comment.

10.FOREST HOLIDAYS and CITF UPDATE

Simon Hodgson updated the Committee on the latest developments with the financing of the business and the challenges being faced to gain the necessary approvals; which were recognised as going beyond the remit of the Committee. The Committee had a detailed discussion of the issues and asked that their comments be taken into account if and when it became necessary for the Commissioners or officials to make any decision on the issues being considered.

The Committee was also concerned by the demands being placed on officials by the repeated investigations and enquiries into past events, which appeared to be disproportionate given the value of the business and the small area of the estate involved. This concern was noted, but it was also recognised that it had to be accepted as part of the need for public accountability. It had proved difficult to anticipate what new approaches might be taken by those opposed to new developments. For instance, whilst it was right that stakeholders should have the opportunity to make their concerns known, the most recent case had seen a concerted focus on discrediting the business itself moving beyond commenting on the issues directly associated with the proposed development.

11.AOB

None