

Forest Services Board

11 December 2019

Minutes of the fourth meeting of the Forest Services Board

Bristol Golf Centre, Common Mead Lane, Hambrook, Winterbourne, BS16 1QQ

Attendees

Sir Harry Studholme (Chair)

Ian Gambles

Richard Greenhous

George McRobbie

Steve Meeks

Liz Philip

Shirley Trundle

Adam Bealby (for item 4 – Communications)

Steph Rhodes (for item 6 – The English Tree Strategy)

Gemma Thomas – minutes

1. Welcome and apologies

The Chair welcomed attendees to the meeting. Shirley Trundle was running late due to trains.

Declaration of Interest

The Chair asked if board members had any conflicts of interest to declare, beyond those declarations of interest published on the Forestry Commission website at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/register-of-interests-forestry-commissioners>.

George McRobbie declared an interest in importing Southern Yellow Pine.

2. Minutes of the last meeting and Matters Arising

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

Actions had all been completed, were in train, or due to be picked up at this meeting.

3. Director's Update and Dashboard

Dashboard

The Board welcomed the changes to the Dashboard and thanked David Cross and his team for their work on this. It was agreed that the dashboard and annexes should be updated to use the same numbering system, the dashboard and risk register should be aligned, and that the next edition should be produced so that it could easily be read on screen, with links through from the dashboard to the relevant annexes.

Action 1: Richard Greenhous to provide David Cross and Steph Rhodes with the Board's feedback on the dashboard to reflect in the next edition of the dashboard and risk register.

Ancient Woodland Loss

The Board thanked David Cross and team for providing the data they had requested on ancient woodland loss, which provided evidence to respond to Ministerial, NGO and public concerns about this, the public profile of which had grown in recent years, including in light of major developments such as HS2. The Board discussed publishing this data and how to engage appropriately with relevant other government departments, such as MHCLG and DFT, before doing so.

Action 2: Richard Greenhous to provide David Cross and Steph Rhodes with the Board's feedback on the data provided on ancient woodland loss and agree next steps towards any decision to publish this.

Directors Report

Richard Greenhous updated the Board on matters that had arisen since the Directors Report had been written. This included the meetings of the Forestry Commissioners and of the Tree Strategy Steering Group the previous day. These had assumed that, following the election, ministers would want to act quickly to start making progress towards ambitious woodland creation targets. They had also discussed the possibility of legally binding tree planting targets. A lessons learned exercise was now underway for the initial implementation phase of the Urban Tree Challenge Fund, which was of importance to both the FC and Defra.

The Board thanked the Director for his report and noted as encouraging the 92% response rate from FS staff to the FC staff engagement survey.

4. Communications

The Board welcomed Adam Bealby to the meeting. The Board had a wide-ranging discussion about the importance of good communications in achieving FS's priorities. The focus on tree-planting, and the attendant media and public interest, required a strong communications strategy and implementation. This included the interface with other high profile issues such as climate change, biodiversity, plastics and food security. The Board was keen to encourage and support Ministers in amplifying key messages. They offered Adam their individual and collective assistance with any campaigns, making best use of their networks and other connections and events to which they might be able to facilitate access.

The Board noted the launch of the Woodland Carbon Guarantee and that this had been unavoidably low-key due to its timing, just before the pre-election period. In that context the stakeholder response had been encouraging. There will be a sustained campaign through the auctions of the next two years.

The Board thanked Adam Bealby, who left the meeting.

5. Finance Report

Steve Meeks updated the Board on FS's financial position at end October 2019, Business Planning for 2020-21, and Spending Review 2020. The Board noted the savings that FS had been required to make in light of the in-year reduction by Defra of the FC's budget, expressing concern that there should not be sustained cuts to investment in IT given feedback from staff that this required significant improvement in some areas. The Board discussed the interaction between the overarching pressure across the Defra Group as a whole to reduce budgets further in 2020-21 and the large bids being made for additional funding required to meet ambitious tree planting targets, which made business planning for 2020-21 especially challenging. The Board agreed the critical importance of any new capital investment being accompanied by resource sufficient to deliver it.

6. The English Tree Strategy

The Board welcomed Steph Rhodes to the meeting.

The Board had a wide-ranging discussion on the English Tree Strategy. There was an expectation that, after the election, any new minister might want to make rapid progress on the strategy. The Board identified the risk that the strategy could lack focus and emphasised the need to agree clear success criteria, suggesting that the current success criteria were too diffuse. While it seemed inevitable that the strategy would focus primarily on how to achieve high ambitions for tree planting, they agreed that the

strategy's scope should also include the good woodland management required to maximise the quality and value of both existing and new woodlands.

The Board understood that the earlier the strategy was published, the higher level it would be, while later publication might allow its further development into what they favoured, which was a strategy that contained sufficient detail and commitments to translate easily into a viable delivery programme. Any strategy, but especially a high level one, would then require a robust implementation plan.

The Board recognised the influence that the wider context would have on the strategy, not least the election, EU Exit, the Budget and Spending Review, some or all of which would or might occur before the strategy was published. It would be essential for the strategy's heightened ambitions to be matched with adequate additional funding, which were expected to be bid for from the Budget and Spending Review. The strategy would therefore require careful choreography with these events.

The Board was keen for the strategy to help shape the development of the new Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme as a key incentive for achieving whatever the strategy's priorities were.

The Board emphasised the importance of good stakeholder engagement in developing the strategy and were keen to see this ramped up following the election, offering their assistance with this as required.

The Board suggested that effective local engagement with the strategy would be essential for its successful delivery, which would be facilitated by the strategy being scalable at local levels, perhaps by providing a blueprint for Local Authority level tree strategies.

The Board welcomed the recent appointment of Alec Rhodes as a full-time project manager for the strategy, who they encouraged to ensure that those issues they had raised would be addressed as part of the strategy's further development. As part of this they encouraged the development of a robust risk management strategy.

The Board thanked Steph Rhodes for the paper.

Action 3: Steph Rhodes to provide Alec Rhodes with the Board's feedback on the English Tree Strategy and ask him to reflect this in the Strategy's further development.

7. Deer Management

Steph Rhodes presented the paper, on behalf of Tina Shilleto. The Board agreed the paper's recommendation to bring FS's future deer management arrangements in house. But the Board recommended that before proceeding with implementation and communication of the new arrangements, ministers (once appointed) were informed and final confirmation provided by Human Resources that TUPE would not apply to the creation of these new roles in relation to any existing roles at the Deer Initiative Ltd. The Board thanked Steph Rhodes, and Tina Shilleto for the paper.

Steph Rhodes left the meeting.

Action 4: Steph Rhodes to provide Tina Shilleto with the Board's feedback on FS's future deer management arrangements and ensure that Ministers are informed and any TUPE implications are confirmed before implementing or communicating them.

8. Future meetings

Sir Harry Studholme informed the Board that he had asked Liz Philip to chair the March meeting, should a new Chair not be in place by then. George McRobbie confirmed that he would remain a Board member until 31 March.

The Chair closed the meeting.