

OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

**FORESTRY COMMISSION EXECUTIVE BOARD
MINUTES OF THE 100TH MEETING
Via telephone
26 March 2020**

Attendees:

Ian Gambles (Chair)
Richard Greenhous
Tristram Hilborn
Steve Meeks
Meirion Nelson
James Pendlebury
Steph Rhodes
Jo Ridgway
Mike Seddon

Julia Lovell - minute secretary

Wellbeing and Inclusion Manager – for item 3 Updates on COVID-19

Apologies:

None

1. Welcome and introductions

Ian Gambles welcomed everyone to the meeting. No apologies had been received. The Chair acknowledged that the COVID-19 outbreak was causing stress to the organisation and so passed thanks to all those attending for prioritising attendance.

2. Minutes of the Executive Board 29 January 2020

The minutes of the meeting of the Forestry Commission Executive Board (EB) of the 29 January 2020 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

The EB agreed to have an update on the vehicles policy at a future meeting to complete Action 3.

Mike Seddon to ask Head of Mechanical Engineering to provide comparative costs for electric vehicles, including tax implications of the CAPES incentives and changes.

The EB agreed to defer Action 4 to the next meeting of EB.

Richard Greenhouse to present an item on FC Carbon and net zero targets to the EB at the March meeting.

Action 14 was recorded as in hand but delayed due to the resource implications following the COVID19 outbreak.

Jo Ridgway to put together options for an FC wide management programme.

The EB were updated that actions 19-22 were in progress but that resourcing the programme would be delayed by COVID-19; Knowledge and Information Management (KIM) Lead would be asked to provide an update at a future meeting.

All other actions were confirmed as complete.

Action 1: Head of Mechanical Engineering to provide an update on vehicle policy through provide comparative costing for electric vehicles, including tax implications of the CAPES incentives and changes at a future meeting of the EB.

Action 2: Richard Greenhouse to present an item on FC Carbon and net zero targets to the EB at a later meeting.

Action 3: Jo Ridgway to put together options for an FC wide management programme.

Action 4: KIM Lead to put together proposals for a knowledge and information management programme to present at a future EB meeting. This is to include the initial actions to shift culture, governance and technology leading on to steady-state KIM management.

3. Update items

Tax Risk Register

Ian Gambles asked Steve Meeks to provide an update on this item.

Steve provided an update on the Tax Risk Register. The EB agreed that the document is a good start to keep track of risks related to tax but that there is more work to be done to expand and account for other tax risks. Meirion Nelson agreed to contribute more formally to this with Steve.

Steve confirmed that there is nothing worth highlighting to the EB for further action. All issues are being managed and risks are being mitigated. The Chair asked Steve to highlight any areas of concern to the EB in the future, including any resource concerns.

Steve Meeks confirmed that tax training is currently in development. The training module was on track to be rolled out in early summer, but may have to be delayed until Autumn 2020.

Action 5: Meirion Nelson to contribute to the tax risk register with Steve Meeks.

FC Strategic Risk Register

Steve Meeks provided an update to the EB on the FC Strategic Risk Register. The register has been made more focused with easier description, with additional comments on the use of language from HR taken on board. Steve confirmed that there was more work forthcoming on how the FC manage some of these risks, but that this was more in the language rather than an omission of action.

The Chair thanked Steve and his team for incorporating the feedback on the content and format of the risk register. The Chair asked the EB to review and shorten or simplify mitigation actions for those who own the risks to make the register more accessible.

Action 6: Steve Meeks to ask risk owners to shorten and simplify mitigating actions to make the register more accessible.

Counter fraud, bribery and corruption policy

Steve Meeks introduced this item. Steve updated the EB that the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) have considered how to tackle fraud, bribery and corruption through policy to meet the functional standards set by the Cabinet Office. Steve raised that the Cabinet Office encourages such registers to be available to all staff for review, but that this is not mandatory. Overall, the FC are still working, closely with GIAA, the Cabinet Office and Defra to make sure our metrics against functional standards for fraud detection are robust.

Steve updated the EB that in 2019-20 there were two instances of fraud reported to the ARAC. Action was taken rapidly to lock down and contain the events, and further action was taken to ensure this does not happen again.

The Chair thanked Steve and his team for their work on this matter.

Offer 2020

The Chair introduced this item. Ian Gambles confirmed that the work on Offer 2020 is still moving forward. The project board considered delaying this work due to the COVID-19 outbreak, but decided to prioritise the project. Draft business case will be discussed at the 15 April EB meeting as planned. This meeting will provide another opportunity for a decision on whether to delay the project as the situation develops. The project may be delayed if the Cabinet Office cannot review the business case due to COVID-19 resource implications.

Ian confirmed that the costing of the business case was nearly complete and that the next stage will be to look at affordability of the possible options. The proposal will go through tier 1 and 2 staff councils, however it will not be shared with the whole staff group until after approval by the Cabinet office. The rationale for this is that we cannot share the business case with staff prior to approval by the Cabinet Office as it may raise expectations. The FC need to be in a recoverable position if the case is rejected. FC have already engaged with staff much more for this project than other organisations have historically going through a similar process. Majority of organisations do not engage staff or unions until approval has been received from the Cabinet Office. The proposal will be shared with staff in the autumn if there are no delays to the process.

COVID-19

The Wellbeing and Inclusion Manager joined the meeting for this update. Jo Ridgway provided an update on this fast changing item and cautioned that any decisions taken today may need to be changed as the situation is updated.

Jo updated the EB that she is attending Defra HR, Cabinet Office and Internal comms meetings. The main focus of these is strategic workforce planning – ensuring there is sufficient resource to deliver key priorities. For this reason is it important that HR casework continues. Jo confirmed that as a part of this guidance will be coming about deploying civil servants to other roles. Our current position does not support staff volunteering for service with the NHS - FC staff are required first for FC duties and otherwise may be required for re-deployment to other government departments.

Part of this work is also making sure that death in service and bereavement policies are updated to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak. Jo confirmed that unions are fully engaged in this.

HR are also looking into potentially reviewing the FC working from home policy. The current situation is temporary but as the outbreak continues this may need to be reviewed longer term in order to support staff appropriately where needed. Line managers are being asked to support staff to avoid hardship.

Jo confirmed that volunteering can continue within the current volunteering policy, subject to staff following government's health and safety guidelines. Recruitment will continue to be supported but the focus is likely to be on the most critical roles.

HR are drafting lines on who should work from home, or other places of work, including support to line managers for this. The FC may need to draft supporting letters to provide to essential staff if they are challenged by the police when out and about. The current advice is to show FC identification to the police if challenged while carrying out work.

The EB agreed that the level of communication between EB members about the ongoing COVID-19 response is helpful and appropriate. The Chair asked EB members to provide cover arrangements as part of the response to COVID-19. Ian Gambles confirmed that Mike Seddon would cover him in his absence. As there are 3 accounting officers within the FC, the EB agreed that it needs to decide on how to follow HMT guidance regarding temporary accounting officers. The Chair asked Steve Meeks to review and update the EB.

The EB agreed to discuss further action and wider impacts as a result of the COVID-19 response, including recovery phase.

Jo also updated the EB on other HR work that has been affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. The Wellbeing pages have gone live and Jo will circulate the link. These pages provide information on working from home and a manager toolkit, including a reminder to managers to support staff by keeping in contact during this time. Jo thanked FC HR Business Partner and Forest Research Senior HR & Policy Manager for their work to produce this page.

Jo also confirmed that the staff engagement survey action plans are being returned. Most actions are focusing on the need for better communication, leadership and management. There is a genuine need for managers to keep staff engaged, inspired and supported especially during the COVID-19 outbreak. Jo Sunderland will provide support to teams as a result of the staff engagement survey to help colleagues over the coming weeks.

Action 7: Jo Ridgway to send the Wellbeing page link to EB members for information.

Action 8: Julia Lovell to compile EB cover arrangements on behalf of Ian Gambles.

Action 9: Julia Lovell to organise COVID-19 EB discussion to assess wider impact over the medium and long term.

Action 10: Steve to review HMT guidance to provide EB with decision on whether it would be useful to appoint a temporary accounting officer.

COVID-19 update: Message clarity to workforce

The Chair introduced this item. The Chair acknowledged that there are inconsistencies in some of the messages about who should be attending work and asked how and whether it is prudent for the EB to agree on an over-arching approach to provide staff with advice.

There was a wide ranging discussion on this. The EB agreed that the message is tangled but that it is not possible to make rules that apply everywhere all the time and that the situation is changing quickly. Mike Seddon, Richard Greenhous and James Pendlebury confirmed that they are currently working on operational guidance setting out areas of on-site work which are expected to continue. Ian Gambles asked that the rationale for operational guidance is kept broadly consistent across the agencies.

The EB agreed that following the publication of such guidance to reconvene to see if there is any improvement to be done to the communication and how 'essential' is interpreted. Jo Ridgway asked to have key messages flagged to her as she is having weekly meetings with trade unions and may be asked for the rationale behind this communication.

Action 11: EB to follow up on the issue of who should be working at the EB COVID-19 catch up call. Ian Gambles will continue to raise this at Defra leadership level.

Action 12: EB members to share key messages with Jo Ridgway on COVID-19 communications across the FC agencies.

Volunteering to support COVID-19 response

The Chair acknowledged the number of queries received from colleagues who wanted to use their resource to help the NHS. The response from the public was positive to this campaign already. The EB agreed that the FC cannot currently support this as the first call on civil servants whose work can be re-prioritised will be to other government departments. The Chair asked Jo Ridgway to keep the EB updated on requests for staff secondments of this nature.

Action 13: Jo Ridgway to update EB on any requests for staff from other government departments.

COVID-19: Homeworking equipment allowance

The Chair introduced this item – Defra corporate services group has announced £150 allowance for home working equipment. The Chair wanted views from the EB as the FC is not a part of the Defra corporate services group on whether a similar support structure would be helpful at this time. The EB had a brief discussion on this item. All agreed that existing arrangements and flexibility was generally sufficient to support staff working from home, and line managers should be empowered to take a supportive approach to particular requests for further support where justified. Jo Ridgway agreed to revise the list of FAQs on the COVID-19 response to clarify the position.

Action 14: Jo Ridgway to update the FAQs in relation to homeworking equipment.

COVID-19: Extension to performance review year

The Chair introduced this item. COVID-19 may delay the performance review process currently on hand, and it has been suggested by the Cabinet Office that this may need to get extended to end of June or September. The Chair asked the EB whether a delay would make sense to cover the 18 month review period, or whether it would be better to press on and complete the performance reviews online or via telephone.

There was a wide ranging discussion on this point. The EB agreed that reviews are best done face to face but recognised the risk that any deadline may be revised again. If the message is to do these online to a particular deadline, then perhaps there is no rationale for the delay. The EB recognised that some staff have already started the performance review process, in which case these staff will need clear lines in terms of what to do now. Jo Ridgway noted that the rationale for the delay is that some staff are flat out in response to COVID-19 and that we are expecting significant staff absence. For this reason the EB agreed that the formal process and paperwork is postponed, while ensuring that performance is still managed and objectives are reviewed as normal part of day to day work. The EB asked Jo Ridgway to put together lines for managers and staff on this.

Action 15: Jo Ridgway to produce lines on extension to the performance review year.

4. Business planning 2020

Steve Meeks provided an update to the EB on business planning for 2020. Steve has looked at how to achieve 5% efficiency savings across the organisation. Steve confirmed that budget should be issued by 31 March, which will include the 5% savings (as adjusted). There is a proposal for a further 2.5% retention in 20/21. There is a risk that this may be translated to an in-year cut later on. Steve confirmed that as he is still awaiting information to rework internal allocations and that this will be included in the delegation letters for the new financial year.

Steve acknowledged that COVID-19 is likely to have a significant financial impact on the budget and plan for 2020-21. He confirmed that this is being monitored.

5. England Tree Planting Programme

The Chair introduced this item and confirmed that ministers are keen to continue with the tree planting programme. However, there is inconsistency in priorities and a tension between long term ambitions and the difficulties with progressing a new programme of this nature during a public health crisis.

Richard Greenhous confirmed that the programme board for tree planting is aiming to meet soon, and will need to focus on preparing realistic business cases for the

Treasury. Steph Rhodes confirmed that the project board will need to discuss what is reasonably feasible to deliver this year.

Mike Seddon confirmed that work necessary to acquire land for new tree planting is currently categorised as non-essential under COVID-19 guidance. For this reason the tree planting targets are dependent on the impact of COVID-19. All agreed to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on the England tree planting programme at a later meeting.

Action 16: EB to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on the England tree planting programme.

6. AOB

There was no other business.

The Chair thanked everyone for attending and closed the meeting.