

**OFFICIAL SENSITIVE**

**FORESTRY COMMISSION EXECUTIVE BOARD  
MINUTES OF THE 105<sup>th</sup> MEETING  
via MS Teams  
15 December 2020**

**Attendees:**

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

Julia Lovell - minute secretary

Leadership and Development Manager  
Wellbeing Advisor

**1. Welcome and introductions**

Ian Gambles (Chair) welcomed everyone to the meeting.

**2. Minutes of the Executive Board 5 November 2020**

The minutes of the meeting of the Forestry Commission Executive Board (EB) of the 5 November 2020 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

The EB agreed to carry Action 1 forward to a later meeting, the group agreed to support Richard Greenhous in compiling this item.

All other actions were confirmed as complete.

**Action 1:** Richard Greenhous to present an item on FC Carbon and net zero targets to the EB at a later meeting.

**3. Forestry Commission Management Development Programme**

Leadership and Development Manager joined the meeting and Jo Ridgway introduced this item. This is an important piece of work that resulted as an action

from the findings of the 2019 Staff Survey and Jo Ridgway was commissioned to take this forward in February 2020. Covid-19 has slowed the progress of this project. The purpose of this item is to provide the EB with an update on the work so far and check the direction of travel meets the Board's expectations.

Leadership and Development Manager provided a brief update of the work on the programme so far. The EB members were asked to discuss and approve the vision, aims and objectives of the programme, to agree the focus of specified staff groups, the use of budget, and to discuss some proposed names for the programme as part of communication to staff.

The EB broadly endorsed all recommendations subject to further work on a number of points below:

- The specified staff groups to target the programme at was broadly agreed, but the need to emphasise more engagement and inclusion of senior leaders was discussed and agreed. Senior leaders right across the whole business need to be visibly engaged and supportive for the programme to be a success;
- There needs to be a decision made on what training is included as part of this programme, for example financial literacy; there was a case for including this, especially as the Forestry Commission is being asked to do more with less, but it is a big area in itself and could draw focus and time away from the central objective of improving management;
- The EB wanted the programme to have greater focus on delivery outcomes and to ensure that any indicators used are SMART;
- Programme and timing needs to dovetail with the change in the performance management process with clear communications about how they will link as they are two separate projects with significant interdependencies;
- EB agreed to provide suggestions for the name via correspondence.

The Board agreed that training should be accredited. The EB asked Julie to provide an update on the design of this programme, including firmer objectives, in spring. The EB agreed that the programme needs to be rolled out expeditiously as this work has come about as a result of staff survey in 2019 and is at risk of becoming outdated as Staff Survey 2021 gets under way.

**Action 2:** Leadership and Development Manager to bring back design of the programme with deliverables for approval to a spring meeting of the EB.

**Action 3:** EB to provide comments to Leadership and Development Manager about a name for the programme via correspondence.

#### **4. Offer 2020**

Steve Meeks and Jo Ridgway provided an update on this project. The plan had been to submit the Offer 2020 business case, as endorsed by the EB, to the Cabinet Office (CO) and HM Treasury (HMT) via Defra for approval in December 2020. Two recent issues have obliged us to reevaluate the position. Firstly, the pause in Civil Service pay increases for 2021-22 announced by the Chancellor and, secondly, changes in the timing for submitting business cases to CO/HMT.

Given these issues it was felt that a business case submitted in December is unlikely to be approved. Steve therefore recommended that the Offer 2020 pay reform proposals are submitted to Defra to seek an agreement in principle from the Permanent Secretary and the Secretary of State, with approval in 2021, and to submit the case to HMT in a year's time to align with the multi-year CSR.

The EB agreed that it is worth pausing the business case to be submitted at the next CSR, after emergence of government policy on CS pay.

Jo Ridgway confirmed that after conversations with Defra, there were other challenges to overcome in the business case. Defra's perception is that the offer is overly generous and further consideration will need to be given to how the FC improves productivity.

The business case is compelling on the basis of harmonisation agenda, however the cost greatly outweighs the productivity gains which the FC have been advised to revisit. It is unlikely that the CO would approve a business case where individual members of staff receive substantial increases in pay. There may also need to be further consideration of the numbers of staff positively affected and the numbers pay protected. Although it was recognised that the FC is being asked to do more with less already, the EB did agree to re-evaluate the options for improving productivity in the light of feedback from Defra.

The rationale for the business case is still strong and relevant. For this reason the EB agreed to pause discussion of wider issues until there was further clarity, and to seek agreement in principle for now. It was acknowledged that it is unlikely staff will view the offer as generous. It will be necessary to get communication on Offer 2020 right as the perception is it has lost momentum.

**Action 4:** Jo, Steve and Offer 2020 Project Manager to take forward Offer 2020 submission to Defra with Ian and EB sign-off.

**Action 5:** Offer 2020 project to review communication to staff about update on Offer 2020.

## **5. Tax and Strategic Risk Register**

Steve Meeks provided an update on the FC Tax Register. This is now fairly settled, there is a monthly reconciliation between VAT and receipts. There are two new

courses on VAT for Forestry England staff on iTrent, and there are plans to roll these out further to Forest Services (FS) staff.

The Tax Register is reviewed and discussed by the Tax Forum (last meeting was on 9 December 2020). There is a new risk in relation to the tax implications of blended working arrangements that may be brought in post Covid. Meirion Nelson confirmed that there is a meeting with HR to how best to manage the issue.

Steve provided an update on the Strategic Risk Register, which is also presented to the Board of Commissioners and to the FC Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC). Steph Rhodes highlighted the risk around meeting tree planting targets in an otherwise challenging year with lack of certainty around financial support for the programme.

**Action 6:** Tax Register to be reviewed as an item at the next FC ARAC, and subsequently on an annual basis.

**Action 7:** Steve to ensure that the Tax Forum stays on top of the potential implications of blended working and keep the EB informed if or when there is a change.

## **6. Wellbeing**

The Wellbeing Advisor joined the meeting and introduced the proposal for a Wellbeing dashboard. This work was started in 2016 with an initial wellbeing offer for staff. The impact of Covid-19 has since pushed Wellbeing into the spotlight. This year's pulse surveys have shown some common issues for staff resulting in fatigue: workload, negative aspects of technology, lack of genuine connection and the impact this has on communication. However, staff are also grateful for the flexibility this has offered and the opportunity to change the way we work.

The EB thanked the Wellbeing Advisor for presenting the Wellbeing dashboard. The Group suggested that it would be useful to have more context for the dashboard, such as what actions have been taken or are being proposed to be taken on issues. The EB suggested that the dashboard is presented to the EB on a bi-annual basis as part of corporate responsibility to make a decision on whether there is a need for any additional central actions to support staff. Should an urgent matter arise between these meetings, this would be tabled by exception.

## **7. Business planning update**

Steve confirmed that we continue to press Defra for financial relief from the impact of Covid-19 on Forestry England and Forest Research. We should have clarity on this before the end of 2020 as it is linked to the Supplementary Estimate process. Otherwise the in-year position is stable.

Regarding the business plan for 2021-22 Steve has not yet been able to obtain the HMT letter to Defra confirming their allocations. We are though working closely with Defra on prioritising options within the NER and FFaB OSGs. As part of that process we are seeking extra funding for Nature for Climate (ETPP), EU Exit and Plant Health; and will continue to press on rejected CSR20 bids where encouraged to do so by Defra.

Steve confirmed that Defra have converted the 2.5% in-year 20-21 saving to a recurrent cut, and are currently planning on retaining 2.2% for unmanaged pressures and overprogramming in resources. This is on top of the 5% recurrent cut to our opening 20-21 baseline. Delivery of the England Tree Planting Programme could be impacted by a reduction in finances for Forest Services.

Steve also confirmed that ExCo are meeting on 18 December 2020 to discuss scenarios and impacts. The Non-Executive Directors have a review session of these on 14-15 January 2021, with a deadline to ExCo submission on 20 January 2021, a further meeting on 26 January and submission to HM Treasury on 29 January 2021.

The timetable for internal business planning will be dependent on when the Forestry Commission gets its allocations and the outcome.

The EB thanked Steve for the update and agreed to discuss the progress or outcome of this item at the January EB meeting.

**Action 8:** Steve Meeks to provide an update on business planning at the January 2021 EB meeting.

## **8. AOB**

### Intranet access

The Chair updated the Board that IT are looking into giving FR colleagues access to the FC intranet. This would be beneficial as it would enable all FC staff to access the full range of FC communications, including wellbeing, inclusion, diversity, and lunch-and-learn sessions. EB agreed that this would be a positive step.

Jo Ridgway noted that FCTU representatives are able to access the FC intranet but not yet the FR intranet. FC and FR IT are discussing how to resolve this going forward without compromising systems.

### Revised travel policy

Tristram Hilborn updated the EB that there has been a change in the Government Fleet Commitment made by Grant Shapps. The target for all CAPES vehicles to be

Ultra-Low-Emission-Vehicles has moved to 2024 from 2030. The rest of the FC policy on cars is currently compliant.

Any CAPES vehicles from April 2021-22 will need to be ULEV. Tristram confirmed that the vehicles currently in the pipeline are compliant, however there is ambiguity from the Office of Low Emission Vehicles what is defined as ULEV or low emission so this area is likely to need attention in the future.

#### PPA Christmas leave and communication to staff

Richard Greenhous noted that the additional day of leave over the festive period has highlighted inconsistency of previous and current Christmas arrangements. All agreed that this inconsistency should not be addressed now, but that this will need discussion and approval at the March EB meeting.

**Action 9:** Julia Lovell to put festive period arrangements on agenda for the March EB meeting.

No further business was raised, and the meeting was closed.