

OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

**FORESTRY COMMISSION EXECUTIVE BOARD
MINUTES OF THE 107th MEETING
via MS Teams
25 March 2021**

Attendees:

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

Julia Lovell – minute secretary

Head of Health, Safety and Technical Training – for the item on Mandatory Training

Leadership and Development Manager – for the item on the FC Leadership
Development Programme

Reward and Pensions Manager – for the item on London Weighting

Wellbeing and Inclusion Manager – for the item on Diversity and Inclusion Strategy

HR Business Partner – for the Christmas PPA Leave item

1. Welcome and introductions

Ian Gambles (Chair) welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Minutes of the Executive Board 26 January 2021

The minutes of the meeting of the Forestry Commission Executive Board (EB) of the 26 January 2021 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

Steve Meeks provided an update on Action 2 – to take forward Offer 2020 submission to Defra following EB sign-off. EB had signed off the draft submission, but there has been work done subsequently to look at affordability of the recommended option. Steve will update the draft for final submission to Defra before Easter break.

All other actions were agreed as discharged.

Action 1: Jo, Steve and Offer 2020 Project Manager to take forward Offer 2020 submission to Defra.

3. Development offering for Forestry Commission Managers

Leadership and Development Manager joined the meeting for this item.

The EB had previously endorsed proposals to set up a development and training programme for Forestry Commission managers. Leadership and Development Manager presented options for EB endorsement. The recommended option was proposal three – to work with an EY training provider Bailey & French, who are also on the Civil Service Learning framework.

Meirion Nelson and Steve Meeks noted that EY are FC's external auditors. The recommended option would need to be checked with FC ARAC Chair, Julia Grant, and the National Audit Office for conflict of interest first. The EB preferred the programme roll-out to be over 6 months, rather than 4 to reduce the impact on staff time away from work.

The recommendations of the paper were agreed in principle to expedite delivery of the programme, subject to some further thought. There was a discussion around three main issues for further consideration before endorsing this option fully.

Firstly, the EB asked to look into sustainability of the programme to ensure the programme is embedded over time. Secondly, the EB asked to provide more information on the plan for delivery and especially the rationale for which grades of staff to include. The board felt strongly that the programme needs to be endorsed and supported from the top down. And thirdly, the EB asked for a review of the scope of the training, to identify which parts should take priority for a confident and competent manager. The main skills gap identified was in the emotional intelligence and people skills training. It was not necessary for the programme to attempt to cover all areas of skill and competence important to a good manager. For example, it would be reasonable for financial management training to be made available separately. All three areas for further consideration need to be underpinned by sound assumptions on costs and resource, including staff time.

Action 2: Leadership and Development Manager to check with FC ARAC Chair and National Audit Office to ensure there is no conflict of interest in EY providing the FC leadership training programme.

Action 3: Leadership and Development Manager to provide clarity on extending the audience for the training programme to the EB and Pay bands 1 and 2, and the investment costs associated with this.

Action 4: Leadership and Development Manager to review ambition and scope to align essential skills of a good people manager with the training programme package.

Action 5: Leadership and Development Manager to come back to the EB for endorsement of the management training programme once these actions have been resolved.

4. Festive Break PPA Leave Arrangements

HR Business Partner joined the meeting to present this item. It has recently surfaced that there are inconsistencies in the way public, privileged and additional (PPA) leave during Christmas is provided across the Forestry Commission. Some staff have historically been gifted a discretionary half-day leave in Silvan House as part of Christmas Leave. The recommendation to the EB was to remove the discretionary half-day leave from staff to provide consistency across the Forestry Commission.

The EB agreed that there is a need for consistency for staff across the Forestry Commission for this. Forest Research HR needed further time to consult on the proposals to understand the impact on FR of the options presented. The EB tentatively endorsed option 3 of the proposal, subject to being able to carry this out in a consistent way across all parts of the Forestry Commission, including for field and operational roles.

Action 6: James Pendlebury to discuss options for Christmas PPA Leave with Forest Research HR team to understand impact of the options on FR and to provide a preferred option.

Action 7: HR Business Partner to recommend option 3 to the EB via correspondence after looking at how this option can be rolled out consistently and fairly across parts of the Forestry Commission.

5. Initial Recommendations for FC carbon reduction targets

Richard Greenhous thanked everyone who had given their time to support the exploratory work on setting out FC-wide carbon reduction targets. The recommendation is to set evidence-based targets to make these actionable and deliverable. This exploratory work can be done over the summer by a working group, which will report to the EB in November. Richard noted that Defra is publishing its sustainability strategy at the end of the year which will inform and affect this work.

The EB endorsed the recommendations. The FC Carbon Reduction working group is to come back to the EB in November to provide further recommendations on how to define, measure and achieve these targets.

6. Diversity and Inclusion update

Wellbeing and Inclusion Manager joined the meeting for this item. The Forestry Commission Diversity and Inclusion strategy has been driven by the concerns raised in the staff engagement survey and is built on previous work in this area.

There were a number of comments on how to make the presented strategy better. Richard Greenhous expressed an interest in finding new innovative ways of delivering the strategy as it was important to make links with the wider forestry sector and that we should aim higher about how we measure inclusion with a positive inclusion measure not just a reduction in bullying, harassment and discrimination. Steph Rhodes would welcome more refined action plans, and specifically to tackle the fear of making mistakes which stymies conversation and personal growth in this area. Mike Seddon suggested that Forestry England would be better placed to manage the work on collecting and managing data of visitors than HR team.

The EB endorsed the Strategy and thanked Wellbeing and Inclusion Manager for the work to get it to this stage.

7. Budget update

Steve Meeks provided a budget update. Internal allocations had to be estimated as at the time of the meeting the Delegated Authority Document (DAD) letter for 2021-22 had not yet been received. The DAD letters were expected to be issued on 31 March 2021.

Steve had worked on internal allocations based on business as usual assumptions for resource allocations only. The proposal was to utilise corporate reserve held in the Commissioners' Office to offset the bulk of the £1.975m savings required by Defra and to make pro-rata adjustments across parts of the Forestry Commission to find the balance. The proposal also recognises the 2020-21 forecast resource underspend and that this will go to Forestry England on an unrestricted basis at the year-end, and can then be used if there are further Defra cuts in 2021-22. It was noted that the proposal would leave the Forestry Commission vulnerable to future cuts by exhausting the corporate reserve.

The EB endorsed the recommended approach to establishing FC BAU internal allocations for 2021-22, with the caveat that this was a best guess estimate in the absence of DAD letters. Members of the EB asked for temporary delegated authority letters to enable them to authorise expenditure in the absence of a DAD letter from Defra.

Action 8: Ian and Steve to consider how to resolve the issue of interim authority so parts of the Forestry Commission can commit expenditure from the start of the new financial year.

8. Strategic Risk Register

The EB discussed the strategic risk register, noting high risk areas, active mitigations and updates. Financial sustainability risk had been updated to reflect receipt of £6m financial relief to help the impact of Covid-19, which has been offset by uncertainty over business planning and the duration of the next spending review. The information management risk had been updated to reflect the progress in Knowledge and Information Management project, however the risk rating needs further review to acknowledge this progress. The security risk had been updated after the positive work of the Security Risk Management Forum. The pay and reward risk had been updated to reflect the latest position of the Offer 2020 project, including the intention to lodge a submission with Defra before Easter.

Richard Greenhous noted that the risk associated with EU Exit needs to be updated.

Steph Rhodes updated the EB on the risk associated with the England Tree Planting Programme (ETPP) and the way the progress mitigates this. Steph noted that the administrative role of risk management lags significantly behind the progress in noting, addressing and mitigating the risks associated with the ETPP. The Chair asked for a new risk associated with the ETPP to be added to the register around the growing opposition to productive forestry.

Action 9: Richard Greenhous to update the risk associated with EU Exit.

Action 10: Steph Rhodes to add the risk around growing opposition to productive forestry.

Action 11: Steve Meeks to look at the consistency in the rating of risks.

9. London Weighting

Pay and Reward Manager joined the meeting for this item. FC Trade Unions requested that the FC look into options for London Weighting as part of pay review negotiations in October 2020.

Currently FC staff in London get no extra allowance for high living costs. There are a number of options available for the EB to consider. Any option which involves introducing a new London Weighting allowance will need Defra approval. Following initial conversations Defra have advised against a formal London allowance. For this reason the recommendation is to use a Recruitment and Retention Allowance (RRA) to provide an informal London allowance for FC staff based in London. If the EB agree to use an RRA, other high living cost areas may also be eligible.

The EB discussed the proposal and did not endorse the recommendation. The RRA is a tool for roles where recruitment or retention is a challenge, and should continue to be used in that manner or it would risk becoming an arbitrary and unfair practice.

Action 12: Jo Ridgway to draft a formal response from Ian Gambles to the Trade Unions on EB decision not to implement London Weighting.

10. Mandatory Training

Head of Health, Safety and Training joined the meeting for this item. At the December meeting the EB asked the Mandatory Training Task and Finish Group to review whether safeguarding awareness training should be mandatory for staff in Forest Research, whether cyber security training should be mandatory for all staff, and to review the cadence of refresher training to make sure it is proportionate to risk.

Forest Research wanted to clarify that they are not declining the offer of safeguarding training, but will be utilising a bespoke training for all staff as that offered through Civil Service Learning is too generic. The EB was updated that the cyber security training will be a shorter mandatory online course.

The EB endorsed the recommendations in the paper. The EB asked for a report on compliance with mandatory training to the four accounting officers in parts of the FC by November, and then every six months after that to the respective executive teams. The EB agreed to drive up levels of compliance through senior level support.

Action 13: Head of Health, Safety and Training to report to the four accounting officers in November on compliance with mandatory training across parts of the Forestry Commission.

11. AOB

Ian Gambles noted that his leaving date has been confirmed as 31 May 2021.

There was no other business raised, and the meeting was closed.