

OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

**FORESTRY COMMISSION EXECUTIVE BOARD
MINUTES OF EXTRA-ORDINARY COVID-19 RESPONSE MEETING
Via telephone
1 April 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

Apologies:

None

1. Welcome and introductions

Ian Gambles welcomed everyone to the meeting. No apologies had been received.

2. Workforce impacts

Update

Jo Ridgway provided a brief update on the various work streams that are ongoing as a result of the response to the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak. The broad area of updates were: conversations with Defra on the effect of the response on organisational structures; effect on redundancies; update to the volunteering for COVID-19 response policy; update on recruitment; help with recording of absences; update on Well-being work; development of the leadership and management programme; work on special paid leave; clarity around performance management; furlough of staff; meetings with Her Majesty's Treasury about how we are handling the response; rewriting of FAQs for staff; update to death in service and bereavement policies in light of the outbreak.

Jo requested that the EB remind and support line managers in reporting absence. All COVID-19 related absence must be reported to HR.

The Chair thanked Jo and her team for the work that is currently ongoing to support the organisation through this challenging time.

Mike Seddon queried whether staff who are redeployed to other government departments over this period would continue being paid by Forestry Commission or by the government department where they are carrying out the work. Jo confirmed that there is still no guidance on this but that she will press for an answer. Jo also confirmed there is no application process for redeployment and that jobs advertised on civil service jobs are not part of this process.

Action 1: Jo Ridgway to provide a reminder to staff that sick absence must be recorded and that COVID-19 absence should be reported to HR as per guidance.

Action 2: Jo Ridgway to seek guidance on whether staff redeployed from the Forestry Commission to other government departments will continue being paid by the FC or the government department that they are redeployed to.

'Essential Work'

The Chair introduced this item. Operational guidance has been released to staff on who should be going to work, and who should stay at home even if unable to work from home. All agreed that guidance has been released and is fully in line with the most recent government guidance.

The EB agreed that there needs to be further planning to understand which staff can be redeployed, and which are essential to the operations of the Forestry Commission beyond government guidance. All agreed that there may be further lockdown guidance if the situation worsens and that this decision may need revising in the future.

Action 3: EB to prepare plans for redeployment of staff if resource is requested by the Cabinet Office for other government departments.

Volunteering

The Chair introduced this item. It is laudable that staff wish to volunteer to help the NHS deal with the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak. Jo Ridgway reminded that civil servants are excluded from the Emergency Volunteering Leave and so the FC cannot provide paid leave for this type of volunteering. Government guidance is that business should continue if it is safe to do so. However all agreed that the FC is keen to provide support staff and considered a more nuanced position. The EB agreed to support community-based volunteering that follows medical advice, which can be balanced with work and has had line manager approval.

2. Financial impacts

Update and current assessments

Steve Meeks provided an update on the financial impacts to the FC as a result of the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak. Steve confirmed that he and Meirion Nelson are having conversations with Defra. HMT have confirmed that they are setting a high bar for intervention in the public sector. Steve confirmed that he will engage with members of the EB separately to build a business case to Treasury through Defra for Forestry England and Forest Research.

Ian Gambles noted that the business case should evidence we have taken all other measures available prior to applying for intervention. Mike Seddon confirmed that Forestry England are putting together a best, worst and most likely scenario plan for 2020/21 and considering the most appropriate actions for each. These cases will also consider the longer term impact.

James Pendlebury raised the issue that half the income of Forest Research is commercial, job roles and sites may straddle both commercially and publicly funded programmes. There is also a risk that government agenda will change post COVID-19 and that research funding may be cut.

Action 4: Ian Gambles, James Pendlebury and Meirion Nelson to discuss Forest Research finance in more detail – with specific focus on supply issues, and whether payment will be received for research that cannot be delivered as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Sector, suppliers, customers

The Chair asked the EB for and update on any emerging issues on this item.

Mike Seddon updated the EB that there is uncertainty around income from the timber sector and recreational tenancies. Recreational tenancies account for a significant proportion of income. Asking for rent relief will impact turnover. An issue that may emerge at a later date is rent relief from tenants. Tristram Hilborn confirmed that the impact on the timber sector is varied; currently it is holding up well but this may change and big mills are closed.

Richard Greenhous updated the EB that nurseries are closing to follow guidance on social-distancing. This will impact the tree planting targets for this year. To further exacerbate this issue, workers cannot travel to plant trees as temporary accommodation is also closed.

Measures – Redeployment

Ian Gambles noted that the FC has not yet received a request from the Cabinet Office to redeploy staff to other government departments. Ian asked the EB on how they will manage such requests should these be lodged.

Tristram Hilborn confirmed that Forestry England are working on a plan for redeployment around the forest estate, but that they first need to understand staff absence as a result of the COVID-19 coronavirus. They are still working on what roles cannot be released, this is proving challenging. Mike Seddon confirmed that there needs to be further clarity on how to manage cash flow issues from the government for grant and commercially funded organisations such as Forestry England before such plans can be with a reasonable level of confidence. All agreed.

Richard Greenhous raised the issue that redeploying staff now will have an impact further down the line when staff absence may become a bigger issue. There also needs to be greater clarity in terms of which activities are acceptable to be dropped if a member of staff is redeployed to another government department.

The EB agreed to look into workforce planning for each area of the business, as per Action 3. The plans should contain: who the FC can let go to work in another government department (this is unlikely to be anybody if the FC has to continue paying staff costs), and contingency planning for covering work that is essential to the FC. The plans should be clear what activities will stop if staff time is to be given to another government department.

Measures – Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

Mike Seddon introduced this item. Mike confirmed that Forestry England will explore this avenue to help with liquidity. Mike and his team will look into how to best present this externally and to staff as this may be the best course of action for some. All agreed that this will need careful messaging and early engagement with trade unions.

Measures – Business rate relief

Mike Seddon updated the EB that Forestry England are looking into whether they qualify for business rate relief or deferral under the current guidelines.

Approach to Defra/HMT

The Chair confirmed that the FC needs to demonstrate that we have explored and exhausted all other avenues of financial relief prior to applying to Defra or the Treasury for interventionist measures. It needs to be clear that the situation is unsustainable without intervention. Such issues are not unique to the FC and Defra are aware. The FC need to continue to log issues and concerns to help build a full picture should a business case need to be put forward in the future.

3. Wider impacts

Performance Management System

The action on this item has already been agreed and actioned – deadline for formal performance reviews has been deferred until end of September.

England Tree Planting Programme

The Chair introduced this item. There are currently mixed messages about the England tree planting programme in terms of its priority for resource allocation and government priorities may be revisited after COVID-19. Defra England Tree Planting Programme director role has been filled. FC Delivery Director position will be filled on a temporary basis in the interim until it is possible to run a recruitment exercise.

Richard Greenhous updated the EB that Forest Services are keen to continue building momentum for this programme. The Programme Board will meet on 23 April. The big risks facing this programme are: damage to the nursery sector due to COVID-19, continuing momentum in the forestry sector, spending review may reprioritise resources after COVID-19.

All agreed that due to the current uncertainty around possible risks and mitigating actions available to the FC, medium and longer term impact item should be revisited at a later stage.

Medium and longer term

All agreed to revisit this item at a later EB meeting.

4. AOB

Steph Rhodes noted that absenteeism guidance has been updated and this will need promoting to staff. Steph also flagged that there are issues in terms of getting IT equipment, such as phones and laptops.

Jo Ridgway updated the EB that the EAP account handler has been furloughed. She will confirm whether EAP is still available to staff.

Jo also noted that confidential teleconference conversations must have an extra level of security.

The Chair thanked all for attending. All agreed to meet the following week for further updates and to discuss any arising issues as the situation changes.

Action 5: Julia Lovell to seek and provide guidance on assuring security for teleconference calls.

Action 6: Julia Lovell to set up EB COVID-19 call the following week.