

**OFFICIAL SENSITIVE**

**FORESTRY COMMISSION EXECUTIVE BOARD  
MINUTES OF EXTRA-ORDINARY COVID-19 RESPONSE MEETING  
Via telephone  
7 April 2020**

**Attendees:**

Ian Gambles (Chair)  
Head of Forest Services Delivery  
Tristram Hilborn  
Steve Meeks  
Meirion Nelson  
James Pendlebury  
Jo Ridgway  
Mike Seddon

Julia Lovell - minute secretary

**Apologies:**

Richard Greenhous  
Steph Rhodes

**1. Welcome, introductions and minutes**

Ian Gambles (Chair) welcomed everyone to the meeting and acknowledged apologies from Richard Greenhous and Steph Rhodes. Ian introduced Head of Forest Services Delivery to the meeting to represent Forest Services.

The minutes of the 1 April COVID-19 EB were agreed as a true and accurate accord of the meeting subject to one amendment: Meirion Nelson and Steve Meeks are having conversations with Defra and not with the Treasury.

Actions 1 and 2 were confirmed as complete; Jo Ridgway clarified that any staff redeployed would be paid by the home department. The EB agreed to carry forward Actions 3 and 4.

All other actions were agreed as complete.

**Action 1:** EB to prepare plans for redeployment of staff if resource is requested by the Cabinet Office for other government departments.

**Action 2:** 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.

## **2. Workforce impacts**

The Chair introduced this item and asked Jo Ridgway to provide an update.

### Update

Jo Ridgway provided a brief update on the various work streams as a result of the response to the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak. Jo confirmed that consistent messaging is difficult as meetings are cancelled by Defra and the Cabinet Office. However, otherwise HR are working on updating staff with revised versions of guidance. Jo confirmed that revisions will be included in the COVID-19 FAQ for staff.

Jo confirmed that revised guidance to be published will be on: new annual leave regulation and how this will affect staff currently on special paid leave; a wellbeing offer update; new guidance on expenses to help with working from home; guidance on security and privacy while working from home; the launch of an online leadership tool; and confirmation of purchase of smartphones for business as Vodafone is currently overwhelmed.

Jo updated the EB that the MOD requested a list of reservists that could be called upon for in the next 6-12 months. Jo confirmed that we have a low level of recorded reservists. If necessary, there is the option of drafting a business case against mobilising these staff.

Jo also confirmed progress on other strands of work in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, such as: weekly absence figures; setting up a session on redeployment to address staff questions and concerns; weekly meetings with the Forestry Commission Trade Union (FCTU); and training for more staff in HR to help process death in service situations. Jo also updated the EB that the expense payment run was carried out successfully from home this week.

Jo suggested that following Easter the EB should discuss actions following on from COVID-19 response: how to support staff coming back to an office routine including any ongoing support for social distancing and isolation. There will be risks and opportunities to be identified and considered by the EB.

The Chair thanked Jo for the update on the many strands of work flared up as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak.

### Redeployment

The Chair introduced this item. The FC should be prepared to give up staff to continue the running of key government departments in our desire to act collaboratively with the national effort. This must be balanced with the viability of the FC business. It was a perverse incentive that the FC would incur greater cost and business viability risk from redeploying staff – at our own cost – than from using the CJRS scheme. Ian Gambles has raised this balancing issue with the Defra Permanent Secretary; however the FC must be prepared for contingency arrangements. The EB agreed to meet via tele-conference after Easter to address this question once there is more clarity in financial planning.

**Action 3:** Julia Lovell to organise a COVID-19 tele-conference after Easter.

### **3. Financial impacts**

#### Update

Steve Meeks confirmed that there is little to update on the financial impacts to the FC as a result of the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak at the moment. There will be more clarity in this area once business modelling has been carried out and government plans have been confirmed.

Mike Seddon and Tristram Hilborn confirmed that Forestry England financial planning is underway and that this will be refined by individual business units to provide a robust financial plan. The position should be clearer by 17 April 2020 but is subject to change.

#### Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

The Chair introduced this item and asked the EB for an update on rationale, process, scope and timetable for putting staff on furlough leave.

Mike Seddon updated the EB on activities undertaken by Forestry England to help with this decision. Mike confirmed that HR and operational leads have started categorising job roles at a high level to help make this decision. Mike requested for Jo Ridgway to initiate the conversation with FCTU about the process, scope and timetable in the week after Easter. Mike confirmed that the situation will need reviewing as it develops. Ian agreed to review and share the overall FC financial position with the Defra Finance Director after Easter following this exercise so they are aware of the risks and mitigating actions the FC are taking.

James Pendlebury confirmed that current Forest Research (FR) position is that there are no immediate issues and cash flow still healthy. Meirion Nelson updated the EB on FR financial position. Meirion confirmed that there are three main risks for FR: non-delivery of programmes, customers being unable to pay and capital and contractual commitments. Meirion confirmed that these risks have been discussed with Defra and that conversations will continue as the situation develops.

Mike raised that work currently being undertaken by FR for Forestry England may have payments delayed. Mike and James agreed to discuss their financial position outside the EB meeting.

Head of Forest Service (FS) Delivery confirmed that FS have not entered any early stage discussions about redeployment as staff are needed to continue carrying out their duties.

**Action 4:** Jo Ridgway to initiate discussion with FCTU about putting staff on furlough leave through CJRS.

**Action 5:** Ian Gambles to update Defra Finance Director on the overall FC financial position following the impact of COVID-19.

**Action 6:** Mike Seddon to meet with James Pendlebury to discuss financial implications of COVID-19 on Forest Research programmes for Forestry England.

#### **4. Medium and longer term impacts**

The Chair introduced this item and acknowledged that some of these conversations are already happening, however that there is little certainty of the full impact and a lot will depend on government action further down the line. The EB agreed with the Chair's summary. The EB agreed that it is important to stay close and also feed into government policy on return back to business as usual following the COVID-19 lockdown. The EB agreed to have another call after the government review of movement restrictions.

#### **5. AOB**

Head of FS Delivery updated the EB that the Sustainable Forest Management team will be considering the position on site visits after Easter break. Forest Services will approach the Defra forestry policy team directly to help ensure a unified approach to site visits across Defra, subject to any significant change to government guidance. James Pendlebury requested that these conversations include the plant survey team as otherwise staff may get inconsistent messaging about carrying out their work.

**Action 7:** Head of FS Delivery to ask Head of Plant Health Forestry and Contingency to liaise with Chief Plant Health Office at Defra and James Pendlebury to ensure a consistent approach to plant survey work

Ian Gambles reminded the EB that the Offer 2020 decision meeting is on 15 April 2020. Ian reminded the EB to review the options thoroughly and come prepared to the meeting to have a constructive and decisive conversation about this significant project, including in the context of COVID-19 impact.

The Chair thanked all for attending the meeting and closed the call.