

OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

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

Attendees:

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

Julia Lovell - minute secretary

Apologies:

Steve Meeks

1. Welcome, introductions and minutes

Ian Gambles (Chair) welcomed everyone to the meeting and acknowledged receiving apologies from Steve Meeks.

The minutes of the 7 April COVID-19 EB were agreed as a true and accurate accord of the meeting subject to a correction in the numbering of the action points.

2. Action points from previous COVID-19 EB meeting 16 April 2020

All agreed that Action 1 in relation to planning for redeployment of staff from Forestry Commission to other areas of the civil service has evolved. Jo Ridgway updated the EB on conversations with Defra and the Cabinet Office about redeployment of Forestry Commission staff across central government. Jo is checking with the Head of FC Information Services whether FC IT systems are compatible with DWP to enable staff to continue working from home prior to offering resource for redeployment. Jo has confirmed that no request for staff has yet been made.

Ian and Mike Seddon confirmed that the funding point has not changed, if Forestry England staff are redeployed Forestry England would be expected to pay staff costs despite loss of commercial income. Mike raised that the bigger challenge would be reopening forests just at the time when key staff may have been redeployed and that

for these reasons it might still be inappropriate to redeploy more than a very few Forestry England staff to other areas of the civil service. Ian noted that this point could be raised at the meeting with Defra finance next week.

Richard Greenhous updated on Action 7 in engaging with Defra to support the forestry sector through the restrictions. Richard noted that with the exception of the nursery sector there was no obvious need for special support for the forestry sector. He commented that the sector needs to promote its importance more during this time. It was noted that this is an area where the Scottish Government may be more active, and this should be monitored.

All other actions were agreed as discharged.

Action 1: Jo Ridgway to continue to monitor the situation and stay in touch with Defra in case Forestry Commission get a request for staff to be redeployed across the civil service.

Action 2: Mike Seddon and Ian Gambles to cover the redeployment issue in the meeting with Defra finance next week.

Action 3: The EB to continue to keep in mind the possibility of a pressing request for volunteers for redeployment and to plan for individual members of staff, or groups of staff that could be redeployed.

3. Workforce update

The Chair introduced this item and asked Jo Ridgway to provide a workforce update. Jo provided an update on the many work streams that HR is currently undertaking to help the organisation deal with the COVID-19 impact such as:

- the impact of restrictions on Forestry England and its staff,
- update to HR policy as a result of the outbreak which will include larger sections on domestic abuse, leadership and management, and volunteering,
- actions from the staff engagement survey aligning with workshops recently published by the Cabinet Office,
- returning to work planning,
- updates on absence and the costs to the organisation as a result.

Jo also updated the EB that the Cabinet Office has engaged with Forestry England and Forest Services in a survey about the cultural impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the civil service.

4. Financial impacts

The Chair introduced this item and provided an update to the EB. Ian confirmed he is meeting with the Defra group finance director, Heather Smith, next week. Defra have requested a financial analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on arm's length bodies. Ian

confirmed that work is continuing to evidence the detail of the financial impact and mitigations. Ian asked for an update from the EB on this item.

Forestry England held their board this week where financial impact of COVID-19 was discussed. Mike confirmed that the substantive part of financial impact mitigations is on expenditure reduction. Despite these actions, the financial position of Forestry England is still unsustainable in best case scenario due to running down cash reserves. For this reason Mike is planning further measures to improve Forestry England's financial position, including use of CJRS. This will be communicated to staff next week; comms will be shared with EB in advance on a confidential basis. The meeting with Heather Smith will be an important step as a significant funding gap remains to be closed.

Meirion Nelson provided an update for Forest Research following a meeting earlier in the week with Ian and James. Meirion informed the EB that FR mitigations will focus on two main themes of recoverability and deliverability. This will clarify the FR financial position. Meirion noted that FR are also aware of other impacts of COVID-19 that are not directly connected to the outbreak or restrictions, such as workforce reforms, which will result in a change to working practice following recovery.

The Chair thanked all for the update, all agreed to review financial impacts the following week.

Action 4: EB to review financial impact next week.

5. Recovery

The Chair introduced this item in the context that thinking within and outside government is moving towards recovery planning. Ian acknowledged that recovery planning will be in the context of government guidance, but that once restrictions are lifted the FC should be prepared to act accordingly. It is likely that restrictions will be lifted in a progressive manner and that social distancing will still be a requirement of opening up. Aversion to risk is likely to be balanced by the urgency to revive the economy. This will mean that the FC will need to be prepared to interpret, clarify and act on messages from the government for staff and customers.

Jo provided an update on this item. Nationally work is commencing on returning to the new normal. Part of this work is focused on ensuring that buildings are up to sufficient standards of cleanliness and security, and another part is on thinking about new ways of working to support social distancing, for example through staggering working practices and giving thought how best to support customer facing roles. More pragmatic issues, such as how to support staff who travel to work by public transport or to rethink fire drill process to ensure social distancing, are also being given thought. There is also thought being given to planning for further outbreaks of

COVID-19 after opening up. Jo updated that we will be assigned a particular person in the Cabinet Office who will need to be notified when we agree to re-open an office. Ian suggested that the FC will need to coordinate on recovery planning to ensure consistent messaging across the different parts. This must be done within the context of understanding the specific factors applying to each office and role and the rationale for any difference of approach explained.

Tristram Hilborn provided an update on planning commenced by Forestry England. There are two work streams – for shorter to medium term and longer term adjustments. These focus on 3 key areas: forestry, recreation, and managing the land. Currently Forestry England are assuming that social distancing will be relevant to successful recovery planning, which makes re-opening for recreation the most challenging area to plan for recovery. The difficulty is in striking the balance between offering a desirable business proposition where people want to come and retaining control for public health and safety.

James Pendlebury provided the update for Forest Research recovery planning. James confirmed that the response management team are looking into this and have so far split action into three role categories: office based, field based and lab based. The way staff are brought back to work will vary depending on the category as lab based staff need to be on site to carry out their duties. The planning has advanced enough to consider how to accommodate vulnerable groups and provision of protective equipment with detailed advice and site information. James requested that any high level information that could help inform this planning to be shared across the EB for consistency of messaging to staff across the FC.

Richard Greenhous provided an update for Forest Services. FS have kept their focus on how to continue delivering under current arrangements, including how to recruit staff to meet the tree planting programme targets. Otherwise the recovery planning has been focusing on re-profiling CDEL in partnership with Defra so that the tree planting programme can still be delivered, despite the delay and challenge presented by COVID-19. Steph Rhodes updated that FS have decided to restart more site visits and that this activity will be monitored and the decision reviewed.

Jo Ridgway agreed to circulate a list of things to consider compiled by HR that may help recovery planning.

The Chair thanked everyone for their input and acknowledged that this will be a complex task. For this reason, Ian asked everyone to share their thoughts and activities about returning to the new normal.

Action 5: EB members to circulate their recovery planning for the forum to review collectively and to take stock as and when restrictions change.

6. AOB

There was no other business. The Chair thanked everyone for their time and closed the meeting.