

**OFFICIAL SENSITIVE**

**FORESTRY COMMISSION EXECUTIVE BOARD  
MINUTES OF EXTRA-ORDINARY COVID-19 RESPONSE MEETING  
Via telephone  
30 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 22 April COVID-19 Executive Board (EB) were agreed as a true and accurate accord of the meeting.

**2. Action points from previous COVID-19 EB meeting 22 April 2020**

All actions from the previous meeting were discharged.

**3. Forestry England Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme launch**

The Chair asked Mike Seddon to update the EB on this item. Mike confirmed that overall the Forestry England Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme launch has gone smoothly and wanted to acknowledge the helpful efforts of all those involved, including line managers, trade unions and trade union members. Mike noted that conversations will continue. The general feedback has been that of praise for the pace and quality of communications. A Q&A has been published on the intranet to give guidance to staff on such issues such as how to keep in touch while furloughed.

The Chair congratulated the work of staff in handling this situation well.

#### **4. Defra Finance Meeting debrief**

Ian confirmed that Mike Seddon, Tristram Hilborn, and Defra finance met this week. Ian provided an update on this item. Defra finance engaged well to understand better the FC and Forestry England business model and therefore the financial impact of COVID-19. Ian wanted to acknowledge his gratitude for the thoroughness of the financial information provided for this meeting. Ian noted that there will be a further meeting in mid-May to provide an update to Defra finance on the financial impact.

Ian confirmed that the Treasury is unlikely to view the impact on Forestry Commission in isolation but rather as an integral part of the overall Defra group impact. Ian noted that whilst the main focus of the conversation was Forestry England, the position and impact on Forest Research was also raised. Ian also updated that the rationale for furloughing some Forestry England staff was not challenged. The Chair asked the EB to share any new information on financial position within the EB for the next meeting with Defra finance.

Richard Greenhous requested early engagement on any savings which might be required if the FC had to take steps collectively to reduce its in-year expenditure.

Meirion Nelson updated that work continues to review FR contracts to understand the short and medium term financial impacts of COVID-19. Meirion confirmed that the result of this work is likely to provide a clearer financial picture second week of May.

**Action 1:** EB to meet mid-May in preparation for next meeting with Defra finance to provide an update on FC's financial position.

#### **5. Redeployment**

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

Jo confirmed that the Forestry Commission has received requests from Defra workforce planning for redeployment of staff. We outlined our case for furloughing of staff rather redeploying them, however we need to remain on good terms and so should be prepared to ask a small number of staff to redeploy. Jo has already been in touch and wanted to acknowledge thanks for the engagement from teams on this. Jo confirmed that a handful of staff have been offered from Forestry England and she will present this option to Defra workforce planning.

The Chair noted that it will be important for the Forestry Commission to help with this without compromising our financial position or our ability to deliver. Defra group are aiming to provide 200 people to the national effort.

## **6. Other workforce issues**

Jo provided an update on this item; she circulated around the EB for information current Defra guidance on how to keep safe in the office. This guidance may be over prescriptive for use by the Forestry Commission, currently the guidance available to staff within FC is more appropriate.

Jo confirmed that all civil servants are considered as essential workers and so are eligible for testing for COVID-19. Jo also confirmed that eligibility is only open to those who are showing symptoms, and extends to their household. After some discussion the EB agreed that instructions will be posted on the intranet in the COVID-19 section on how staff can access testing, and that staff will be updated that the FAQs have been renewed.

Jo also updated that HR are working on plans for returning to work and that unions are involved in this. Jo noted that once returning to work is announced this is likely to happen quickly. HR are also still getting returns on action plans as a result of the staff engagement survey. Hints and tips, and guidance in the top three addressed areas will be published on the intranet. Jo reminded the EB of the importance of these areas and to encourage staff to follow these. HR will also be publishing a piece on how to stay engaged in virtual meetings.

Jo confirmed there are two surveys for staff to be engaged in. There will be poll for a selection of the civil service on the perception of the changing nature of roles and general staff experience of working during COVID-19 restrictions. The provisional timeline for this is to go live in mid-May with results in mid-June. There is also a 'culture in crisis' survey which is across the whole of the civil service to evidence the change in working culture. Some early results evidence the strong commitment by civil servants to their role despite lack of support, emergence of silo working, and that people have huge variability in perception of isolation while working. Jo will continue to monitor the themes of this work and provide updates to the EB.

## **7. Recovery planning**

The Chair introduced this item. There is currently a lot of intelligent though uncoordinated discussion on how to return to work. Ian confirmed he is meeting with senior Defra Emergency Operations Centre officials to discuss coordination of recovery planning and will report back to the EB. Ian noted that the FC will need to keep pace and develop our own plans as new information and guidance emerges.

Tristram Hilborn updated the EB that there has been a shift in pace this week about opening up the countryside. Forestry England are communicating with Non-Governmental Organisations on this to provide a coordinated message. NGO current opinion is that the announcement on 7 May 2020 may result in partial reopening on 11 May. Forestry England are preparing for a similar timetable.

Richard Greenhous provided an update for Forest Services. Richard noted that majority of business has kept going so return-to-work planning will not provide a situation dramatically different to now. He confirmed that there is work in providing consistency of messaging with other regulators. Richard raised the issue that a significant proportion of Forest Services work is in partnership with other bodies, so some decisions may be out of our control. Another stream of work for Forest Services is on engagement activity, for projects such as ELMs as consultations and meetings will need to have an alternative to usual engagement routes. Richard noted that different staff will have different circumstances so returning to work in the office will need to be nuanced, for example, depending on how they travel to work.

James Pendlebury circulated the Forest Research draft plan for phased return to work via email to the EB. James noted that the priorities of central government and for devolved administrations may be different so FR are planning with that in mind. FR staff are used to working with this variation, if there is significant deviation between the nations in terms of health and safety FR will flag it. James confirmed that every case for return to site is reviewed by the local team, whether it is to allow a staff member to carry out duties in the lab, or to pick equipment up. James noted some issues for consideration when opening up an office such as shortage of supplies like hand sanitiser and the requirement for a first aider to be on site where more than 10 members of staff are working.

## **8. Non-COVID-19 business**

The Chair introduced this item as the monthly keep in touch meeting for April was cancelled to focus on COVID-19 response.

Jo Ridgway updated the EB that the civil service code annual reminder letter will be circulated this Friday with a specific focus on the zero tolerance to bullying policy.

Meirion Nelson updated the EB that the Forest Research annual report and accounts went to the auditors on this date. They will then go to Defra officials later the same day and to ministers the following week.

## **9. AOB**

Ian updated the EB that there was progress on Offer 2020 work. The project team are taking actions forward and will organise a meeting in early autumn for the EB to make further decisions on this project.

The Chair thanked everyone for their time and closed the meeting.