

OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

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

Director of Estates – for update on buildings for the restart phase item

1. Welcome, introductions and minutes

Ian Gambles (Chair) welcomed everyone to the meeting. There were no apologies.

The minutes of the 30 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 30 April 2020

All actions from the previous meeting were discharged.

3. Restart phase

The Chair introduced this item as the focus of this EB meeting. The Chair outlined five potential overarching areas to consider as a framework to return to business as usual: offices and buildings, hygiene and security, how to address visits and meetings set up by FC, how to address meetings outside of FC, timeline categorisation of activities, and planning for individual members of staff. These overarching themes will need to be worked out to meet the government timeframe as and when it is announced. The Chair noted that it is up to the EB to interpret government guidance in a way that fits the business. There followed a wide ranging discussion on planning to return staff back to business as usual working.

Mike Seddon commented that the last overarching theme focused on individuals and should flow out of the preceding four as it would be challenging for individual circumstances to be taken account of without an underlying strategic plan being in place.

James Pendlebury noted that it will be important to keep an eye on the differences between devolved administrations for planning to return to work. For example, plant health work continues but is restricted. James noted the difference in government guidance for those who live in Wales but work in England, and that some decisions may be out of FC's control, for example where the landlord makes the decisions for their property.

Jo Ridgway noted that while those who work from home have managed to continue with their duties, it is a challenge to develop and move the organisation forward working in this way. For this reason it is important to plan for staff to return to the office where their usual working environment is at the office.

Director of Estates provided an update on the plans drawn up by estates team for buildings and offices so far. She confirmed that the plan for the national office has been completed, and that on the back of this a second document for other sites has been created. The over-riding principle is that there will be fewer people in the buildings at any one time to effectively provide measures of distancing and a greater focus on cleanliness including an entirely clean desk policy. There followed a discussion of what these changes mean for staff, the focus of which was on timing and consistency across the organisation of the reintroduction to office working. The EB agreed that they will need a list of guiding principles that they can agree on collectively, this will allow for nuance for each team while providing consistency of rationale.

The EB agreed that the return to office should be phased by groups of people as some staff have a greater need to be in the office for their role. This means that the guiding principles need to be implemented in a phased way depending on role and site. The EB agreed that this needs to be considered and communicated to staff appropriately. For this reason to give sufficient thought to this planning the EB agreed that end of May should be the earliest for such plans to be implemented.

James Pendlebury noted that Forest Research have a detailed site approval list which matches government guidance, the focus of which is on assuring social distancing and hygiene. The other challenge is ensuring there is a first aider on site and that they are properly protected should they need to respond. As first aiders are all volunteers, this needs to be carefully considered alongside the decision to asking staff to come into the office.

Action 1: Ian Gambles to provide an outline of guiding principles to the EB and Director of Estates to provide a framework for the conversation on reintroducing staff to working in the office.

4. Coronavirus job retention scheme and redeployment

Mike Seddon confirmed that the review point for Forestry England furlough scheme will be in mid-May. Mike noted that recreation staff are likely to have furlough extended as these are public facing roles. Mike also confirmed that under current government guidance Westonbirt cannot be reopened.

Jo Ridgway confirmed that the government extended the CJRS scheme until October. Jo updated the EB that one member of staff will be redeployed to Defra from the Forestry Commission, and that it is likely that the FC will be asked for more. The Chair noted that the FC position has so far been misunderstood; we are unable to redeploy staff we need while remaining financially responsible for them.

5. Other workforce issues

The Chair introduced this item and asked Jo Ridgway to circulate the update on other workforce issues to the EB via email.

Action 2: Jo Ridgway to circulate workforce issues update to the EB via email.

6. Finances

Ian Gambles updated the EB that work is in hand for the next round of conversations with Defra finance the following week. Steve Meeks confirmed that the paper is currently being drafted and will be sent to Defra finance by end of this week. Ian noted that reopening of car parks for recreation will not make a material difference to the previously presented financial situation for Forestry England. Ian confirmed that he will use the meeting with Defra finance to highlight the financial pressures faced by Forest Research. James suggested Thursday for a conversation on financial impact of COVID-19 on FR.

Action 3: James Pendlebury, Meirion Nelson and Ian Gambles to meet ahead of Defra finance meeting to discuss Forest Research financial position.

7. AOB

The Chair noted that recovery planning will also have to include the non-executive directors and when to reconnect them the FC.

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