

**OFFICIAL SENSITIVE**

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

**Attendees:**

Ian Gambles (Chair)  
Richard Greenhous  
Tristram Hilborn  
Steve Meeks  
Meirion Nelson  
Steph Rhodes  
Mike Seddon

Corporate Governance Manager - minute secretary  
HR Business Partner – to provide an update on workforce issues

**1. Welcome and apologies**

Ian Gambles (Chair) welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were received from Jo Ridgway and James Pendlebury.

**2. Minutes and action points from previous COVID-19 EB meeting 12 May 2020**

The minutes of the 12 May COVID-19 Executive Board (EB) were agreed as a true and accurate accord of the meeting.

All actions from the previous meeting were discharged.

**3. Recovery planning**

The Chair introduced the item as the focus of the EB meeting. The Chair confirmed that a message was to be sent out to the organisation as a whole providing further guidance on how the FC is to approach the extended recovery period, a draft of which had been sent prior to the meeting, and requested each members thoughts on what this message should contain.

Mike Seddon suggested that the main principles should be around leadership, the sense of approach and framework covering the next 6 to 12 months over the whole of the FC. It would need to be made clear in the message that the principles and guidance would evolve and change over this period in response to the impact and success of the ways of working put in place. Mike also suggested it be made clear

that while flexibility for ways of working would be necessary no permanent changes would be made until after this test period.

Richard Greenhous supported Mike Seddon's suggestion and requested that the message be sent quickly so staff had guidance in place quickly, noting the phrasing needed to such that staff were aware that ways of working would continually change during the test period. Richard added that it was important to note that the differences between the areas of the FC and ways of working.

Meirion Nelson agreed that the differences in the FC needed to be recognised with the message providing leadership guidance as a whole and reassurance staff will not be asked to return to work unless it is safe to do so. Meirion commented that some corporations were sending messages that staff would not be returning this year so the FC message should be clear that the guidance will evolve as the test period progresses.

Tristram Hilborn expressed concern that if guidance is not provided quickly staff would start to take make individual decisions on how to return to work. Discretion is required over how the return to work should be achieved as different workplaces needed different approaches, but limited numbers could return. Tristram suggested the message include that alternative ways of working for the future would be reviewed but nothing would be fixed currently.

Steph Rhodes commented that it would be useful to state in the message that the decisions taken should be based on the needs of the business. Recognition was needed that staff work with others frequently and so they would need to be flexible because of this.

Steve Meeks agreed that the message should cover the principles for the short term, with local discretion, and that some decisions can be made in the short term that may transform operations however it would take longer for a 'new normal' to be established.

HR Business Partner noted a staggered approach to returning to work was sensible. This could link with the communications plan and highlight that things might change as the test period progressed. Engagement with and safety of staff was key, additionally the FC needed to ensure staff had a way of raising any issues that came up during this period so they could be addressed such as the Trade Union.

The EB agreed that the message should be forward focussed on the next 6 to 12 months with an overall framework of common principles, confirming that flexibility would be required in order to respond to how the situation progressed over that time.

**Action 1** – Ian Gambles to amend the draft message as discussed and send to the EB for comment

**Action 2** – Ian Gambles to send the finalised message on Tuesday 26 May.

#### **4. Coronavirus job retention scheme and redeployment**

Tristram Hilborn confirmed that of the Forestry England recreation staff around 70 had returned to work. Forestry England were going through the next phase of review and it was thought the majority would return by the end of June except for those who were vulnerable or caring for others. Under 50 staff would be remaining on furlough with formal review points set for those returning to work.

HR Business Partner confirmed that while 6 members of staff were offered for redeployment to DEFRA, 2 had started and there were no current indications that others would be requested.

#### **5. Other workforce issues**

HR Business Partner provided an update on behalf of Jo Ridgeway. New guidance had been provided around vulnerable groups, leave and what is appropriate during this period in regard to travelling for work. It was confirmed that any PPE required prior to lockdown could still be used and no additional PPE was required except for first aiders. Guidance regarding attendance for staff who did not wish for children to return to school and did not have childcare was also to be published. Tristram commented that special paid leave for those with childcare was being raised as a concern by staff.

#### **6. Financial impacts**

The Chair confirmed he had spoken to James Pendlebury and Meirion Nelson regarding the impact on Forest Research. A revised paper on the impact on the FC was to be discussed at Thursday's meeting.

#### **7. Updates on non-Covid-19 business**

Mike Seddon updated the EB on the proposed purchase of West Chevington in Northumberland, a 150-hectare site. Half was to be purchased by Drax and leased to Forestry England, with the rest purchased by Forestry England drawing on the Nature for Climate Fund. Lord Goldsmith had agreed the Drax lease but wished for further information on how biodiversity would be optimised under a purchase for Forestry England. Tristram Hilborn added that the interviews for the Head of Woodland Creation were to be held tomorrow and that virtual staff briefings were

being held in Forestry England to allow staff to ask questions and connect across the organisation.

Richard Greenhous commented that the England Tree Strategy Consultation was expected in June with a discussion around peat strategy to be published around the same time. Steph Rhodes added that the review by Scotland of the UK Forest Standard was being commenced and currently the scope of the review was being decided. Richard noted that landowners were waiting for clarification of the tree planting offer before initiating planting work. There had been raised a discovery of unhealthy larch in the south Lake District and it was being established whether this was on Forestry England land.

The first version of the biodiversity matrix is to be signed on 3 June 2020. The baseline for the measure of biodiversity was available and the calculation principle ensures a 10% unit increase in biodiversity after woodland creation. It is anticipated the matrix will be released for trialling in the autumn.

**Action 3** – Steph is to circulate the matrix to the EB when published

Meirion Nelson confirmed that the International Forestry Memorandum of Understanding had been signed by DEFRA. The application to be recognised as an independent research organisation had not been granted, applications for increased funding can be made however FR was not deemed eligible for full IRO status, further discussions are to be held. The FR accounts had been signed off so are on track to meet the organisational timetable.

Steve Meeks stated that while the FR audit committee was to take place the following week the Forestry England and Forest Services Audit and Risk Assurance reports had been delayed until September. Steve and Jo Ridgeway were not project officers for Offer 2020 with the aim to present a business case in September. The FC Framework document had been completed and signed off.

HR Business Partner provided an update on behalf of Jo Ridgeway and stated that the People Strategy for England would be distributed to the EB for comments. As it was national mental health awareness week it was requested any acts of kindness be put on Yammer. Compensations Scheme 2010 terms had been extended to 31 March 2021. Pay remit guidance allows to make payables between 1.5-2.5%, however anything between 2-2.5% would require a special case being put forward. A further resourcing request had been put out from the cabinet and so the FC were likely to receive more requests for support.

**Action 4** – HR Business Partner to draft a statement regarding the pay remit, referencing the change in timing for Offer 2020, and send to the EB for approval prior to uploading to the intranet

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