

**OFFICIAL SENSITIVE**

**FORESTRY COMMISSION EXECUTIVE BOARD  
MINUTES OF THE 108<sup>th</sup> MEETING  
via MS Teams  
27 May 2021**

**Attendees:**

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

Julia Lovell – minute secretary  
HR Business Partner – for item on Workforce policies  
Forest Management Director – for item on BAME Task and Finish Group report  
Pay and Reward Manager – for the item on Pay Remit  
HR Business Partner – for item on Workforce policies  
Beat Manager – East Devon – for item on BAME Task and Finish Group report

**1. Welcome and introductions**

Ian Gambles (Chair) welcomed everyone to the meeting.

**2. Minutes of the Executive Board 25 March 2021 and matters arising**

The minutes for the meeting of the Forestry Commission Executive Board (EB) of the 25 March 2021 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

Jo Ridgway provided an update on actions in relation to the Professional Manager Programme (Actions Points 2-5). Jo confirmed that the programme is now able to progress and that there is no conflict of interest in using Bailey and French as training material providers. Jo also updated the EB that there will be a short session led by Bailey and French to provide an introduction to staff to widen the reach of the programme to pay bands 1 and 2. Jo confirmed that Action Point 4 can be discharged as specialist training is being coordinated internally by subject matter experts.

2 Leadership and Development Manager to check with FC ARAC Chair and National Audit Office to ensure there is no conflict of interest in EY providing the FC leadership training programme.

3 Leadership and Development Manager to provide clarity on extending the audience for the training programme to the EB and Pay bands 1 and 2, and the investment costs associated with this.

4 Leadership and Development Manager to review ambition and scope to align essential skills of a good people manager with the training programme package.

5 Leadership and Development Manager to come back to the EB for endorsement of the management training programme once these actions have been resolved.

Action 7 in reference to Christmas Leave has been completed and EB endorsed moving onto implementation stage.

7 HR Business Partner to recommend option 3 to the EB via correspondence after looking at how this option can be rolled out consistently and fairly across parts of the Forestry Commission.

All actions were agreed as discharged.

### **3. Nature moment update**

Richard Greenhous and Steph Rhodes provided an update on the Nature Moment, as the England Tree Action Plan and the England Peat Action Plan launched week commencing 17 May 2021. Richard thanked everyone who worked to get the Plan launched. There will be a further announcement around the England Woodland Creation Offer opening for applications in early June.

The EB discussed that any strong prioritisation of broadleaf planting to the exclusion of conifers would make achieving tree planting targets all the more challenging. The right trees need to be planted in the right places for the right reasons. If biodiversity drivers dominated to the exclusion of the wider utility woodlands provide, this would risk significantly reducing viable planting. Tree planting targets would not be met if the benefits of planting trees were outweighed by the long-term costs of managing those trees.

### **4. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Task and Finish Group Report**

Forest Management Director (FMD) and Beat Manager for East Devon joined the meeting to present this item.

The EB set up the BAME Task and Finish Group to explore and begin to address diversity and inclusion issues within the Forestry Commission. The task was to explore how to increase the number and tenure of BAME staff, increase the number of visitors from these backgrounds, and ways in which to reduce the disparity between BAME groups and White British staff in the staff engagement survey.

Whilst that was the mission of the Group, there is a shift away from using the 'BAME' which we should embrace. For this reason the report is titled 'Forests for everyone, Ethnicity and Religion.' The FMD asked the EB to discuss the report and recommended the EB to endorse the proposed action plan: the implementation plan, actions themselves and the communications around this plan. FMD also wanted to acknowledge and thank everyone involved in this work.

The EB welcomed the report and agreed that the tone, format and content was appropriate.

Beat Manager for East Devon outlined the recommended actions to improve inclusivity for all through a workplace cultural shift. The recommended activities were:

- To raise awareness internally through various actions such as reverse mentoring and an engagement plan;
- Improve monitoring and evaluation through better collection, analysis and reporting to support evidence based decision making;
- A targeted portfolio of outreach and partnership programs and ensuring that these are self-sustaining;
- Addressing barriers to visiting forests;
- Removal of barriers and bias to improve recruitment, retention and progression of all staff;
- To set up high level governance to oversee this activity through a Diversity Panel to support the delivery of the Diversity & Inclusion Strategy;
- And to make the report available to staff.

The EB thanked everyone involved in this work. The EB endorsed the report. There followed a wide ranging discussion on this item, the main points of which were about:

- Resourcing this programme will be a challenge and it needs to align with the staff forward job plans – majority of the cost will be on Forestry England;
- There needs to be a balance struck between the opportunity costs of a more diverse visitor and staff profile and the relatively short term costs of outreach activity, although the full costs do not come on board until 2023-24;
- How to improve diversity on recruitment panels without undue burden on existing staff;
- Omission of actions on contested history in the report – this is because internal guidance on this already exists and is being followed;

- The make up of the D&I Board and its relationship to the EB;
- And ensuring that HR have sufficient capacity to help deliver this work, although this work is not new;
- Removal of quotas from the published report as may cause a negative response;
- Ethnicity and religion should be decoupled as this may lead to stereotypes though the EB understood the rationale for making the connection in the report and groups work;
- Quarterly reporting on this long-term programme may be excessive.

The EB welcomed and supported the report and agreed that it should be made available to staff. The EB asked that any communication to staff gives consideration to deliverability of actions, the EB's response to the report, and also to provide a more accessible summary version. The EB response is to say that: the EB are supportive in principle of all recommendations, serious about implementing this programme, and that issues of resourcing, scheduling and costing will be given further thought.

The EB agreed that overall responsibility for this work rests with the EB, but that the work is reported back to respective Executive Teams across the Forestry Commission.

**Action 1:** Forest Management Director to publish the Forests for Everyone report internally, after removing the reference to quotas.

**Action 2:** Jo Ridgway to coordinate the EB response to this report with HR colleagues in Forest Research and Forestry England, as agreed by the EB via correspondence.

## **5. FC People Strategy**

Jo Ridgway presented the item on a Forestry Commission People Strategy, the purpose of which is to coherently present FC workforce ambitions in one place. There has not been one since the Forestry Commission started operating on a federated model. While the strategy is new, some of the activity and work underpinning has been ongoing, such as the staff engagement survey or the activity to help with staff wellbeing. The strategy also takes account of the emerging people plans in Forestry England and Forest Research. It provides activity over 5 years, with the first year deliverables already within reach by March 2022.

Jo asked the EB to endorse the strategy, Year 1 deliverables and the communications plan which includes the launch to staff.

The EB endorsed the Strategy. Meirion Nelson asked Jo to work with HR colleagues in Forest Research and Forestry England to make sure the Year One deliverables

are achievable. The EB asked Jo to consider timing in bringing subsequent Year Two, Three and so on to EB as January is too late for budgets to be made available for the following financial year. Interim milestones were requested for complex projects, such as recruitment reviews and any subsequent changes. Richard Greenhous noted that the Wellbeing and Engagement section reads like it covers wellbeing only and so it would be helpful to have engagement drawn out in that section.

The EB supported the change to the recruitment system. Ian Gambles summed up following the EB discussion confirming the FC People Strategy was approved. The Chair confirmed it was approved for launch and did not require the Year One Deliverables to be part of the launch.

**Action 3:** Jo Ridgway to work with colleagues in Forest Research and Forestry England to make sure the FC People Strategy Year One deliverables are achievable. This should not get in the way of the FC People Strategy launch.

**Action 4:** Jo Ridgway to update the Wellbeing and Engagement section of the Strategy to take account of Richard's comments.

**Action 5:** Jo Ridgway to provide a recommendation to the EB on the future of the recruitment system by the end of March 2022.

## **6. Pay remit**

Item redacted

**Action 6:** Reward and Pensions Manager to send DEFRA the relevant documents to affect this change in pay.

## **7. Workforce policies**

Item redacted

## **8. Safeguarding report**

Mike Seddon provided an update to the EB on the safeguarding report for the Forestry Commission. The EB agreed the report as tabled. Mike will present the report to the FC Audit and Risk Advisory Committee.

## **9. FC Assurance mapping**

Steve Meeks provided a brief update on assurance mapping for the Forestry Commission. This is a key part of developing and maintaining board assurance arrangements – confirming where key controls are in place and highlighting where control gaps exist. The mapping has been worked up using HM Treasury's best practice and with guidance from GIAA.

This is now being rolled out across all areas of risk in Forestry Commission. The assurance mapping will align with strategic risks to keep the exercise proportionate and manageable.

## **10. Strategic Risk Register**

Steve introduced the Strategic Risk Register item, the register was last updated in mid-April as part of the periodic reporting cycle to Defra. Steve noted that he still has the outstanding action to review consistency of the risk ratings on the register and so this action is carried forward.

Steve noted that FC17 has been escalated to the Defra Executive Committee and that this will bring the Forestry Commission in line with the Environment Agency and Natural England. There is also a further risk for inclusion on opposition to woodland creation. The EB agreed the addition of this new risk to the register. The EB asked Steve to coordinate updating the register to reflect this change via correspondence.

The EB discussed whether the financial sustainability risk needs updating as the pressures from Covid-19 have been mitigated. However there is still long term uncertainty and immediate pressures that will impact both short and long term capacity, and for this reason the financial risk sustainability risk remains at a high rating. The EB agreed to update this risk to reflect the current circumstances and include the opportunity cost of doing nothing in the spending review.

Tristram Hilborn noted that currently Forestry England struggles to find and retain suitably qualified staff. The risk on recruitment and retention is being realised as it is impacting programmes. The EB agreed that this risk for Forestry England should be escalated to the Strategic Risk Register. While this may not be an immediate risk for Forest Services, this risk may be realised as the England Tree Planting Programme progresses.

**Action 7:** Steve Meeks to look at the consistency in the rating of risks.

**Action 8:** Steve Meeks to update the Strategic Risk Register and to coordinate agreement via correspondence before presenting to the ARAC.

## **11. Interim leadership arrangements**

Richard Stanford will be joining the Forestry Commission on 9 August 2021. Sir William Worsley has requested Mike Seddon to provide interim Chief Executive and Accounting Officer cover for the Forestry Commission until then. As the spending review will get underway over this period Mike has also been designated as the nominated FC director for Spending Review 21. Steve Meeks has been nominated as the engagement lead on SR21 reporting to Mike.

Steve Meeks noted that he will retire in Autumn 2021. Until then Steve will focus on SR21 and transition planning. Steve will be supported by Director of Finance for

Forestry England, Forest Services Management Accountant and Forestry Commission Financial Accountant on developing SR21 bids and defending base lines, and continue working with Anna Brown on the Food Farming and Biosecurity (FFAB) OSG SR21 process.

Mike Seddon noted that he will be on annual leave week commencing 14 June and that Richard Greenhous will cover in his absence.

## **12. AOB**

Steve Meeks wanted to thank Head of Internal Audit and the GIAA team for successfully completing the 20-21 audit programme despite difficulties due to Covid-19 and for the valued assurance provided to the EB.