

OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

**FORESTRY COMMISSION EXECUTIVE BOARD
MINUTES OF THE 109th MEETING
via MS Teams
20 July 2021**

Attendees:

Mike Seddon (interim Chair)
Tristram Hilborn
David Hodson
Richard Greenhous
Meirion Nelson
Steph Rhodes
Jo Ridgway
Richard Stanford (Observer)

Julia Lovell – minute secretary
HR Project Managers – for HR Polices item
HR Business Partners – for Changes in the way we work item

1. Welcome and introductions

Mike Seddon (interim Chair) welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies have been received from Steve Meeks and James Pendlebury. Mike also welcomed to the meeting David Hodson, who will be leading on the Comprehensive Spending Review 2021, and Richard Stanford, the incoming Chief Executive of the Forestry Commission.

2. Minutes of the Executive Board 27 May 2021 and matters arising

The minutes for the meeting of the Forestry Commission Executive Board (EB) of the 27 May 2021 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

Jo Ridgway provided an update on action 2-4.

2 Jo Ridgway to coordinate the EB response to the 'Forests for Everyone' report with Forest Research and Forestry England, as agreed by the EB via correspondence.

3 Jo Ridgway to work with 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.

4 Jo Ridgway to update the Wellbeing and Engagement section of the Strategy to take account of Richard Greenhous' comments.

Jo thanked everyone for their contribution on action point 2. The response is now back with the Task and Finish Group. HR Wellbeing advisor has produced an executive summary of the report to make it more accessible. The developing action plan for this work is being discussed at the Board of Commissioners' meeting on 27 July 2021.

For actions 3 and 4, Jo confirmed that Forest Research and Forestry England are content that year 1 deliverables of the FC People Strategy are achievable. The launch has not yet happened due to unforeseen circumstances of an external partner organisation but will be out in the next few weeks.

The EB agreed to roll actions 5, 7 and 8 forward (below).

All other actions were agreed as discharged.

Action 1: Jo Ridgway to provide a recommendation to the EB on the future of the recruitment system by the end of March 2022.

Action 2: Steve Meeks to look at the consistency in the rating of risks.

Action 3: Steve Meeks to update the Strategic Risk Register and to coordinate agreement via correspondence before presenting to the ARAC. This action has been partly completed.

Jo provided an update on Offer 2020. Defra have provided comments on the Forestry Commission bid. Forestry Commission will meet with Defra interim HR director on 23 August 2021 to understand these comments and how to best address these.

Jo also noted that pay remit negotiations are due to start 22 July 2021. However currently FCTU are struggling to find dates for meetings and so the decision may have to be made via correspondence to meet October pay award implementation deadline for staff.

3. Changes in the way we work

HR Business Partners joined the meeting to update the EB on the 'Changes in the way we work' (CWWW) project. The update provided an overview of the project, summary results of the staff survey on perceptions of flexible working, the progress of the project so far, and next steps. This work is closely aligned with Project Horizon at Defra.

Covid-19 has meant that Forestry Commission staff were forced to adapt quickly to new ways of working. There have been big benefits and some challenges because of this. This summer is dedicated by the CWWW project team to having discussion with teams about how they may implement new ways of working. The aim is to roll out the new ways of working at the beginning of autumn, subject to any changes as a result of Covid-19.

The work has been informed by two staff surveys: one for Forest Services, Forestry England and the Commissioners' Office and one for Forest Research.

Staff have identified that the key benefit of current working practices has been reduced commuting, as well as greater opportunity for focused work and an overall better work-life balance. The main challenges for Forestry England, Forest Services and Commissioners' Office have been identified as: technical issues with IT, fewer opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, and less opportunity to get in contact with colleagues for quick questions. Forest Research staff identified lack of equipment and poor environment as the biggest challenges to the new working practices.

Most survey respondents (75%) welcomed a mix of home and office working, most notably women and those in Forest Services. Majority (70%) of survey respondents stated that they are equally or more effective while working from home; this provides evidence of the feasibility of new ways of working. Staff reported that they would prefer to use office space for collaboration and holding meetings, and home space for focused time. Those who cannot or do not usually work in an office setting (such as field staff) reported that they would also like the opportunity to work from home, for example for administrative tasks or online training.

Guidance for managers, teams and individual staff has been published on the intranet. Next stage is engaging with teams and managers to ensure that what is in the guidance is understood and embedded. The sessions will provide a conversation opportunity about:

- Fairness and consistency of how managers should respond to requests for flexible working
- Availability and process of an independent review if this initial stage fails
- Support for managers to be confident and comfortable to have honest conversations about flexible working with staff
- Ways to address concerns about coming back to the office
- And provide a channel for feedback on this programme of change.

Trade unions have been engaged early on in this work at regular intervals. Their feedback has been invaluable to help make the programme workable for staff and the business.

The EB thanked attendees for the update. Steph requested a follow up meeting to discuss the staff results from her area to ensure any feedback is appropriately addressed. The EB noted that there are many changes and it will be important to provide staff and managers with support for these, as a leadership team they support this work and will lead by example.

Action 4: Steph to follow up on the staff survey to help with growth and transformation of her team.

4. HR Policies

HR Project Managers joined the meeting to present this item. The recommendation is to remove four policies from the original suite of HR policies, and approve seven revised policies, including a new one on Menopause. The approach for communicating the changes in the policies will be tailored to each subject area. Some revisions may be best embedded through training, others may need guidance and support provided as needed.

The main changes proposed were:

- Deletion of two mobile phone policies as these have been rationalised into other policies
- The code of conduct will provide a guide for standards of behaviour we can expect from staff in FC
- Gift and hospitality policy has changed to make sure we keep track of gifts the FC provide to external individuals and organisations, as well as staff receiving gifts.

The EB endorsed these new policies. The EB asked HR Project Managers to provide more clarity on communication of these changes as current policies are not well known or understood. The EB also challenged the follow up of these policies, for example whether the systems are in place to track compliance or how to ensure commonality of decision making when an issue is escalated to a member of the EB.

The EB also noted the aim of completing this programme by March 2022 and the resourcing issues presented by trade unions which may delay delivery.

Action 5: HR Project Managers to provide the EB via correspondence with a communication plan to address the challenge of current lack of understanding of HR policies and to help embed any changes.

Action 6: HR Project Managers to provide advice to EB as to how to ensure commonality of decision making when issues are escalated to a member of the EB.

5. Spending Review 2021

David Hodson updated the EB on progress so far of the comprehensive spending review (CSR21), including the current timeline. The FC have had confirmed who is working on the bid including correlation with counterparts in Defra. First priority bids will be finalised by 9 August, and the unified template (consolidated bid) by 13 August, including revenue (RDEL) and capital (CDEL). The Executive Committee (ExCo) will sign off the consolidated bid that week. Submission to Secretary of State to go on 27 August, prior to submission 9 September, following negotiations with HM Treasury.

The CSR21 team have set out FC's workstreams and aligned these with Defra's. This approach identified gaps in Defra's allocation which are being addressed.

David confirmed that, at the time of presenting, the FC had put in 14 bids, RDEL of £150m and CDEL of £0.5bn. HM Treasury may challenge the relatively high FTE in Forestry England, although this is in large part funded by commercial income. David also confirmed that the FC will have to bid again for previously agreed CDEL although this bid will not fund anything new. Mike Seddon confirmed that the ExCo priorities will align with ministerial priorities.

The EB thanked David and all those who have worked on the CSR21 to get the FC to this stage. The FC are in a good position to provide evidence and detail for the bids early on. It was agreed that despite this robust position we will need to plan ahead as the FC will not have clarity until later in the financial year. Steph Rhodes asked David to include Tree planting programme for England Finance Manager in this work.

Action 7: David Hodson to reach out to Tree planting programme for England Finance Manager to cover the baseline as part of CSR21.

6. AOB

There was no other business and the meeting closed.