

OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

**FORESTRY COMMISSION EXECUTIVE BOARD
MINUTES OF THE 113th MEETING
via MS Teams and in Bristol Conference Room
26 January 2022**

Attendees:

Richard Stanford (Chair)
Anna Brown
Nick Clinton
Jac Davies
Tristram Hilborn
Steph Rhodes
Jo Ridgway
Mike Seddon

Julia Lovell – minute secretary
HR Business Partner – to present AOB on annual leave
FC Head of Comms – to present FC Communications strategy item
Business Development Manager – to update on the Changing the way we work programme
Governance Manager – to present Strategic Risk update item
Central District FMD – to update on the Changing the way we work programme
Head of Training and Health and Safety – to provide a Health and Safety update
HR Project Manager – to present item on the Staff engagement survey

1. Welcome and introductions

The Chair opened the meeting. Forestry England Director of Finance sent his apologies.

2. Minutes of the Executive Board 16 and 18 November 2021 and matters arising

The minutes for the meetings of the Forestry Commission (FC) Executive Board (EB) of the 16 and 18 November 2021 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

Action 1 from 18 November on how Forest Research can connect, access and share information with other parts of the Forestry Commission is in progress with a view for an update to the EB by end of March.

Action 5 was discharged. FC EB members have provided comments on the proposed Performance Review Template, which has now also been shared with and agreed by the FC Trade Union. The updated PR Template is now ready for implementation.

All other actions were agreed as discharged.

3. Health and Safety update

Head of Training and Health and Safety provided an update to the EB on Health and Safety statistics for the FC. There were two major RIDDOR injuries since last report. These H&S team are working closely with the affected teams to provide a full investigation and share lessons learned across the organisation.

The culture change programme has also had part-time project management and communications resource confirmed. This will allow for better staff engagement and embedding of the programme.

4. Forestry Commission Communications Strategy

The EB endorsed the common objective for the FC communications strategy to make Forestry Commission the first port of call for expert knowledge and evidence on all things forestry, with a vision of championing forestry for a resilient future.

The EB endorsed the flow of the narrative. The problem statement will focus on forests, woods and trees and lack of management of these. The EB agreed the problem statement can evolve as terminology, such as 'wellbeing', changes. Other notable comments on the narrative were:

- To address the issue of biodiversity decline in the problem statement, with forests and trees as part of the solution;
- What the Forestry Commission does is for the future, the time for action is now with a sense of urgency;
- Provide a stronger emotional case for call to action.

Head of Communications will circulate proposed wording of the narrative for refinement following these comments and a look at market research on how to tailor the emotional case.

The EB provided suggestions for other target audiences [redacted].

Action 1: Head of Communications to provide a narrative via correspondence for refinement.

Action 2: Head of Communications to set up a focused session with the EB to discuss which audiences to target and how best to engage.

5. Changing the way we work

This project was initiated in January 2020 and catalysed by Covid-19 since then to change to a more blended way of working for the Forestry Commission. The EB was asked to note the transition of the project to business-as-usual as the new way of working has now been embedded across the organisation where appropriate.

Now that restrictions are easing again, the EB noted that this is an important moment that will define how FC operates going forward. There will be ongoing formal monitoring of the programme to ensure the benefits to the organisation and the individual of the flexibility afforded by blended working, with any follow up actions escalated as appropriate.

The Chair wanted to note thanks to the programme delivery team.

6. Year 2 FC People Strategy Deliverables

Jo Ridgway provided an update on the Forestry Commission People Strategy Year 1 and the proposed Year 2 deliverables, the delivery of some which will continue into years 3 and 4. The EB agreed that this ambitious strategy will help recruit and retain staff. For delivery to be successful there may need to be prioritisation of programmes. The EB noted that better a learning and development offer may also help with retention.

A programme to review and improve the current cycle of performance reviews across the Forestry Commission is underway. A proposal is coming back to EB at the end of March from HR Project Manager.

7. Staff engagement survey

HR Project Manager joined the meeting to provide an update on the staff engagement survey for 2022, called the Big Conversation. The aim of the staff survey is to be a conversation between staff and senior leadership teams on which issues to prioritise for resolution, especially after the impact of Covid-19. First report will be ready on 25 March 2022, with a view of unit-focused action plans to be drawn up by June 2022. The EB agreed that they would like to receive a regular update on the progress of action plans. The EB noted that we need to be mindful of internal communications during this time, so these do not skew the results.

[Redacted]

8. Business planning and the Comprehensive spending review

Jacqueline Davies updated the EB that Defra will be establishing themselves as a parent unit to its Arm's Length Bodies (ALB). Jac will over the coming months map out all sources of funding for the Forestry Commission to get a better understanding of the levers and leverage from and for this relationship change.

At the time of the meeting, comprehensive spending review allocations were still yet to be confirmed. Steph Rhodes flagged that the FC may be in a position where not all CDEL will have been spent and this will need flagging back to Defra to help with planning.

The EB also agreed to prioritise the internal audit programme. Some of the actions can be absorbed internally. Jac will review the list for this year, prioritise and agree on the audit programme for 2022-23 with accounting officers.

Action 3: Jacqueline Davies to review and agree the audit programme for 2022-23 with accounting officers via correspondence.

9. Status review and structures

There are currently several reviews being undertaken across government. Recommendations from the FC Status Review being undertaken by Defra will be superseded by this activity. The Review was helpful in identifying the strategic view

for the Forestry Commission. The Commissioners have provided a steer to maintain the Forestry Commission as is currently but with greater freedoms for its units. Chair of the Forestry Commission, Sir William Worsley, will write to the Secretary of State to inform of this direction.

Action 4: The Chair to share Defra FC Status Report with the EB when this is available.

Action 5: Chair to share the letter from Sir William Worsley to the Defra Secretary of State with the EB.

10. FC Corporate plan

There is currently no Forestry Commission wide corporate plan. Jacqueline Davies will review the business plans for Forestry England and Forest Research, and the upcoming consultants' report on future business planning for Forest Services. From these and in consultation with the CEO, a draft of the Forestry Commission wide plan will be provided for the EB in due course.

11. Risk Register

Governance Manager updated the EB that the updated risk register has been submitted to Defra. This submission will be discussed on 22 February 2022 where Defra will decide which risks to accept, and what actions flow through from this. The risk register will then be discussed at the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) meeting on 9 March 2022.

12. England Tree Planting programme

Steph Rhodes provided an update on the England Tree Planting programme to the EB. Initial take up of the England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO) has been good, with the programme receiving applications for 2200 hectares of woodland creation and 816 hectares of applications for the Forestry England woodland partnership offer. The main challenges have so far been the speed of delivery and policy tensions such as between prioritisation of land use. Now that the ETPP has been running for a year there is more lead time for next year's delivery. There is still uncertainty over how the current offer will compare to what the Environmental Land Management Scheme will offer so there is reticence from some land managers to commit to tree planting now.

The first year has been helpful in identifying lessons learned. There are short term (e.g. EWCO process) and longer term (e.g. regulatory reform) improvements that will be the focus of future work. It will be critical to have unrelenting political support to drive this nationally, across government, and to drive behaviour change to plant trees.

13. Honours and awards

The Chair noted congratulations to the Forestry Commission staff who were recognised in this Queen's New Year Honours list. The accounting officers agreed to have a greater role in this process and to give more thought to other processes to

recognise more staff. It is a challenge to get staff to nominate their colleagues, so the EB agreed to drive this from the top.

AOB

- Forestry Commission Annual Leave and Time off in Lieu

HR Business Partner joined the meeting for this item. Some staff repeatedly carry over their accrued annual leave allowance. The Forestry Commission must encourage staff to take time off that is owed to them during this year. The EB agreed that the limit for carrying over annual leave will be 15 days by 31 March 2023, and 10 days by 31 March 2024, with notable exceptions applied across the board. HR Business Partner will engage with FCTU to agree this change to the current policy.

- Impact of the change in restrictions due to Covid-19

Government announced the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions from 27 January 2022. The EB endorsed the provision of the Christmas meal allowance to staff who have not yet had the opportunity to meet for a team meal, should they wish to do so.