

**FORESTRY COMMISSION EXECUTIVE BOARD
MINUTES OF THE 130TH MEETING
via MS Teams and in Bristol Conference Room
10 March 2025**

Attendees:

Richard Stanford (Chair)
Anna Brown
Amanda Grist
Tristram Hilborn
Sam Malpass
Derrick Osgood
James Pendlebury
Paula Rice
Mike Seddon
Interim Chief of Staff (Observer)

Head of Climate Change – Land use framework
Head of Health & Safety and Technical Training – Health and Safety
Head of Performance – Corporate plan
Head of HR, Forest Research – Pay options
Julia Lovell – minute secretary

1. Welcome, updates and introductions

The Chair opened the meeting. Jo Ridgway sent her apologies.

The Chair noted that public finances are stretched and the Prime Minister's recent announcement on reforming the Civil Service.

SoS for Defra met with the Prime Minister last week and talked about the Corry and Hancock reviews. The FC is feeding into both reviews to ensure forestry is on the agenda. Corry is focused on regulation whereas the Hancock review on simplifying and expediting delivery. Defra is organising a summit in April for this latter topic.

Defra have published the Timber Strategy.

2. Minutes of the Executive Board 26 November 2024 and matters arising

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

Actions points were discharged.

3. Health and safety update

One RIDDOR reported in January which was a diagnosis of asymptomatic Lyme disease through sero-monitoring trials that have been undertaken with UK Health Security Agency. These trials determine the feasibility and usefulness of seasonal serological monitoring of staff working outdoors.

There was one safeguarding report. The Board briefly discussed whether reporting was working as it should or whether staff need to have better awareness. The Health and Safety team are working with HR to see if there are improvements that can be made to ensure no systemic issues.

There was one report of a collision of a contractor on an All-Terrain-Vehicle with a member of the public in a car due to icy road conditions.

A tender has been awarded for the lone working system to incumbent provider. The process included field testing of systems to ensure staff have best protection on the market. Staff should not experience any disruption to service.

New targets have been identified for the KPIs of Growing the Future. These include challenges to further improve the take up of mandatory training and a progressive target to improve the efficiency of incident investigations over the next 3 years.

The Look Out & Look After programme is coming to a conclusion within Forestry England and the team are developing a strategy to take this work into business as usual. Many of the elements of the programme are directly relevant to Forest Services and Forest Research and the learning will be shared as soon as all teams are back to full resource strength. The implementation of this will begin with a re-write of the H&S Policies, development of the strategy and targets.

The Board noted that high 93% attendance rate for operational health screening appointments.

4. Funding allocations from business planning

Derrick Osgood presented the Forestry Commission 2024-25 gross outturn and Defra funded positions as at end of January. February actuals are now known, and we have a better understanding of the overall financial position given it being tree planting season. As a result of a decrease in grant claims the Board noted that the Nature for Climate Fund (NCF) CDEL position looks like it is on a downward trend. Forestry England noted that they would need minimum £10.8m from Defra and the variation against funding is in a negative position, though in line with forecast.

Discussions about NCF are ongoing. Derrick expected to receive a commission this week of a follow up on RDEL. Given the uncertainty of funding for NCF the Forestry Commission will continue to engage on the Environmental Land Management (ELM) funding.

Derrick also presented figures as expected from DAD letter on 1 April, which included NCF but not NCA figures. There are RDEL pressures, there is no funding to support the £3m pay uplift and £2m funding for NCF has not been given to the Forestry Commission. This is subject to business planning within each business.

5. GIAA audits cross cutting reviews

Derrick provided high level update on GIAA audits. There were 17 audits in February, with 58 actions open and 4 new audits added since November. The business entertainment audit is a follow up from embedding the new policy. This will go out on 1 April and the policy will be updated following this audit. Otherwise business as usual reporting, with actions being completed.

Internal audit plan for next year has also been agreed though there may need to be an additional one for Forest Services. This plan is costed up and will be presented to the ARAC. Forest Research could delay their audit on contract management to next year if that helps cover an additional one in Forest Services.

The Board declined the proposal to audit budget being retained in the commissioners' office. The reason for this was that retaining cost within the business provides evidence of accountability. It is not a budgeting decision as the struggle is staff resource and time.

6. FC Strategic Risk Register

The Board noted the strategic risk register, which is going to the ARAC on 13 March and briefly discussed the risk around staff. The register is likely to be updated following review by the ARAC meeting.

7. HR review

Defra HR review is ongoing, final report will be shared end of March 2025. The rest of this item was not minuted.

8. Workforce planning for spending review Phase 2

Forestry Commission is working with Defra on this. There are no details yet to share. The rest of this item was not minuted.

9. Follow on pay issues, operational pay update, hard to recruit roles and harmonisation to civil service Terms and Conditions

This year's pay award should aim to follow the principles agreed by the Board last year including to address issues around operational roles and hard to recruit roles. The expectation is that the pay award will be delayed this year which means it is unlikely that a pay flex case would have enough time to be worked through the machinery of government.

a. Operational contract review

Work was initiated in January 2025 to review operational contracts. Since then the review has had scope and terms of reference agreed. Next month there will be a workshop for first assessment of options to develop a new contract type, which can then be taken to negotiate with trade unions. There will also be some work around how to implement changes of preferred option, including a fallback if it is not possible to find a common position with trade unions.

b. Hard to recruit roles

Head of HR for Forest Research put forward proposal to review hard to recruit/retain roles:

- Identify the roles that have the biggest issues by gathering data
- Once roles have been identified, group these and align them to Civil Service Professions or similar
- Benchmark professions against direct competitors and civil service.

- Use role groups to identify alternative pay approaches across government or competitors.

The presenter proposed bringing this as a report back to the EB to help identify next steps and help any negotiation if needed. The Board endorsed the proposal and will welcome the report once it has been completed.

c. Harmonisation to Civil Service Reforms

As the Forestry Commission is being asked to make efficiencies, not harmonising to Civil Service reforms would put the Forestry Commission in a vulnerable position. The Board agreed that Civil Service reforms should be introduced but will need careful consideration on how this would be delivered, working with Defra on their experiences on this subject.

10. Land use framework

The consultation on Land Use Framework opened on 31 January 2025 and will close on 25 April 2025. Head of Climate Change presented first thoughts on the Forestry Commission's response to the Land Use Framework consultation. This draft will be presented to the Board of Commissioners on 18 March.

The Board discussed attendees at the national workshops looking at particular issues around the country.

The Chair noted that timber security is missing from the consultation entirely, whereas food security is mentioned. Woodland does not just provide habitat, it is a productive land use similar to agriculture.

There is also currently no mention of access to nature. There is an opportunity for the Forestry Commission to be explicit in its response on climate change and the speed of growth to empower resilient landscapes.

The Board will review the response, and Chair of the Board of Commissioners will sign off the response on behalf of the commissioners before submitting back to Defra.

11. Balancing duties

The Board endorsed this paper going to the Board of Commissioners with a recommendation of Option 3 as the definition for 'adequate reserves'. The Board briefly discussed next steps on how to enact this policy.

12. Corporate plan

Head of Performance provided an update on the Corporate plan as at end of December (end of quarter).

Ecosystem resilience will miss the Board of Commissioners, but update will be available end of March. The Board of Commissioners will still need an update.

Board framework project is progressing, with the next stage to be a gap analysis on governance. The Board were invited to review a discussion paper out of committee on realistic action and governance when this is ready.

The Board noted that it may be worth articulating the activity in the next meeting for EA008. Head of Performance will commission a single document for all organisations to review, amend and sign off the corporate plan in mid-April.

13. Wellbeing dashboard

The Board received an update on the wellbeing of staff, noting that there have been many reports of work related stress in the last year. The wellbeing team is taking action by providing mental health first aid training this year as well as training for managers, a work stress toolkit published on the intranet, and make available webinars through our Employee Assistance Provider and in partnership with Defra.

The Board welcomed the sickness absence data by payband, noting the high level of absence in pay bands 6a, 6b, and 4. The Board asked for the sickness absence data to be provided in proportion to number of FTE for each payband, and to benchmark against previous year to see trend.

14. AOB

There was no other business and the meeting closed.