

Expert Committee on Forest Science (ECFS)

Minutes of the First Meeting held on Wed 9th Oct. 2013

Novotel Lambeth Bridge, London

Present

Roger Coppock

Professor Julian Evans (Chair)

Professor Peter Freer-Smith

Professor Jaboury Ghazoul

Professor Monique Simmonds

Professor Eunice Simmons

Professor Andrew Watkinson

Peter Whitfield

In attendance

Veronica Cain (secretary)

Wilma Harper

1. Welcome and preliminaries

Wilma Harper welcomed the committee to their first meeting and thanked them for willingness to serve in helping ensure the best provision and quality of science in which the Forestry Commission invests. Professor Evans added his welcome and informed the committee that much of their first meeting would consist of briefings on governance, process and current procedures as well as examining terms of reference.

2. Expert Committee on Forest Science & Terms of reference (Wilma Harper)

Wilma Harper outlined the governance of the Forestry Commission and where ECFS fitted. An overview of the current issues facing the Forestry Commission (FC) was presented to set the context for the rest of the meeting. This included the formation of Natural Resources Wales, the Woodland Policy Enabling Programme and the current pressures on funding and operational aspects. Wilma explained that the formation of this committee is a natural extension of the Independent Review on Science Quality at Forest Research. .

There was discussion on the progress on setting up a new body to manage the Public Forest Estate in England and the consequences for Forest Services and cross border functions. Together this work forms the Woodland Policy Enabling Programme (WPEP). This was the subject of a consultation, which closed in Sept 2013. The recommendations are being drafted for submission to the Minsters and an announcement is expected later this year.

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The ECFS terms of reference were discussed in detail (**TOR appended to the minutes**). Clarity was sought over the definition of 'forestry', as arboriculture is not specifically covered, although individual trees will be of interest in terms of plant health. Both green infrastructure and urban forestry are included. These distinctions should not be seen as hard and fast.

The committee's involvement in peer review and when in the process their input would be most welcome was discussed. The Committee will review the quality of the science and was asked specially to advise on the balance of peer reviewed outputs and technical & operational ones in the delivery of research advice and recommendations.

Forest Research science programmes which in the 2011 review were scored as "Satisfactory" would be revisited. Further discussion on this took place under item 8 below. An external review of the whole of FR is not envisaged at this stage. The Committee was invited to assist FR by highlighting areas being overlooked and to aid with horizon scanning.

Professor Ghazoul noted that the Centre for International Forest Research (CIFOR) is experiencing similar issues and it would be useful to see what could be learned from their experience.

Action 1/13: Professor Ghazoul to summarise briefly and/or alert FC to appropriate outputs from CIFOR.

Professor Evans enquired whether the Terms of Reference could be extended. While feasible, they had been agreed at strategic level by FC and reflect the priorities for the Committee within the time they have available. . In this context it was agreed that it would be useful to know much more about total funding (not just FC) for all forestry and tree-related science in UK (see below), the place of collaborative research with Universities, and the significance of peer reviewed publications versus practical application in evaluating science. The new Science and Innovation Strategy (SIS), to be released in January 2014, addresses some of these points.

3. The FC Research Strategy Management Board (RSMB) and science governance in the FC (Roger Coppock)

Roger Coppock explained the role of the RSMB and its membership. Its key remit is to coordinate the delivery of the Science and Innovation Strategy to meet the needs of the countries and their Ministers and stakeholders. The RSMB has representatives from each devolved country administration, who are the principal customers. The Corporate and Forestry Support (CFS) representatives act as the commissioning body and Forest Research (FR) is the principal but not exclusive means of delivery. Stakeholders are defined as any interested party and are drawn from numerous groups. Stakeholder engagement events provide advice and feedback several of which are organised by the

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devolved administrations. Also day to day feedback on science at a programme level comes in countless ways from many different groups.

Professor Ghazoul and Mr Whitfield both sought clarity on the definition of stakeholders. These can be classed as any interested party and mechanisms of their input vary widely. Ministers are obviously important as they set out the broad priorities. Individual countries' strategies are embedded in the new SIS.

4. The role of Forest Research in providing research to the FC and others (Prof. Peter Freer Smith)

The FR corporate plan (Committee paper 1) is produced annually. Professor Freer-Smith drew attention to the aims and objectives and to funding expectations which are severely constrained. FR is an agency of the FC, and that the FC is the owner and principal customer on behalf of the whole forestry and tree-related sector. Thirty per cent of FR's income comes from external sources.

Research is organised into programmes, but staff organised into Centres, a structure which facilitates networking and cross-sectoral collaboration.

5. Current FC science programmes (Prof. Peter Freer-Smith)

Individual programmes are delivered by staff in different centres and, therefore, are not location dependent. Each programme was outlined in summary, details of staff given and the most recent rating each was accorded. Prof Freer-Smith also highlighted all the external partners e.g. European, Research Council, other government bodies contributing to or participating in a programme.

It was noted that the Inventory, Forecasting and Operational Support (IFOS) unit are part of CFS and commission work from FR and are made up of specialists in mapping, statistics, databases and the National Forest Inventory (NFI) team which has a key role in meeting FC's evidence needs.

6. External evaluation of the current Science and Innovation Strategy (SIS) and FC response (Roger Coppock)

An independent review had been commissioned to explore whether the SIS was delivering against its objectives. This included in-depth stakeholder interviews from very varied backgrounds. Mr Coppock detailed the findings, but in summary, the review was largely favourable but greater attention was needed to be given to the impact of research and early engagement of stakeholders in spending priorities would be welcome. Greater transparency of research proposals was also identified as desirable. Mr Coppock informed the Committee that all of the current research proposals were now available on the FC website. Professor Simmons cautioned that complete transparency was not al-

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ways possible, for example if there were IP or commerciality considerations for Forest Research.

The draft strategy, which has recently been out for consultation, takes account of the review findings, and builds greater engagement into future processes. A verbal presentation of responses to the consultation (Item 7 below) was given.

Committee paper 2 lists the recommendations made by the report and the responses to each. The review and the response will be published, after the RSMB have approved it.

7. The Science and Innovation Strategy review, early analysis of responses to public consultation (Roger Coppock)

The consultation closed on 4th Oct. Overall there has been a positive response to the proposals. Individual points discussed by the committee were:

- The increasing need for open access publishing of science needs addressing and monitoring. Professor Watkinson noted that this is now commonplace and measures are widely available to ensure that the stringent peer review process remains central. This is being discussed with other organisations in a similar position to try to find a common approach. FR scientists publish around 50% of their papers in peer reviewed journals, as well as internal peer review processes.
- It was noted that engagement and communication are not listed in the quantitative measures. This information could be easily collated by assessing the number of hits on a particular web page or the number of followers on a social media page.
- Government is trying to reduce the number and size of its websites and it may be helpful for other organisations to host information of interest to them, including in forest and tree-related areas.
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- It was noted that it would be useful to coordinate the review of the SIS with the external review (below).

8. Report of External Review Group on Forest Science, FC response and action plan progress (Roger Coppock & Prof. Peter Freer-Smith)

The external review listed seven principal recommendations. The FC response and progress to date was set out in Committee paper 3.

The committee considered each of the recommendations and noted progress. Of particular interest were:

- 1) The recommendation to integrate social science across research programmes.
- 2) That the ECFS itself would be a key part in delivery of peer reviewing of commissioning documents.

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3) That the ECFS would also fulfil the role of the former Advisory Committee on Forest Research.

4) That career progression for scientists was being made clearer with specific targets. Discussion with CEFAS who are experiencing similar issues, increased mentoring, and making explicit publication expectations were highlighted.

5) The proposal to establish a small budget for competitive funding to stimulate innovative work.

6) The need to explore commercialisation opportunities more actively.

7) The intention to focus on moving programmes with 'satisfactory' rating to 'good' – the ECFS will play a role in this. This commitment was endorsed by the Forestry Commissioners, since of the 16 programmes reviewed 5 were rated as satisfactory.

In reflecting on these recommendations the committee recognised that part of its remit is to help improve ratings by identifying areas which need development and suggesting aspects which have been overlooked.

The paper recommended that that the ECFS commences a process for measuring the impact of the changes implemented by FR to raise the standard of the programmes identified as satisfactory in the review, and that, during 2014, the ECFS considers whether the changes implemented are sufficient to ensure an improved rating in the next science quality review.

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At the this point Forestry Commission officials left the meeting and the independent members of the committee reflected on the extensive briefing given and proposed a number of actions.

1. ECFS short meeting for Chair and non-officials.

Future meetings

The committee asked for an additional meeting as part of establishing its remit and functioning. This is agreed for 30 January 2014.

30 January 2014 Northern Research Station, nr Edinburgh. All-day meeting to include tour of facilities and an overview of 2 or 3 programmes scored as 'satisfactory', with social science as one of them. Briefing documents will be required to allow for preparation.

18/19 March 2014 Cardiff. To allow stakeholder input/briefing from Natural Resources Wales and Welsh Government.

16/17 September 2014 tba.

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At these meetings additional clarity is sought on:

- defining stakeholders;
- what priority is given to timber products issues;
- engagement with EU programmes and collaboration with international bodies;
- the process for commissioning projects in areas where expertise is lacking (e.g. molecular biology).

Action 2/13: Veronica Cain to take forward arrangements for future meetings
Acquisition of base data

The committee was concerned at the small size of budget allocated to forest and tree-related research. **ECFS requests as a matter of urgency that FC commission an analysis of research spending from all sources – government, research council, industry, NGOs – so as to provide data on funds allocated to forest and tree-related research to allow comparison across the whole land-related sector and with other countries.** It is hoped this would be completed by 31 December 2013.

Action 3/13: Roger Coppock to investigate commissioning an analysis of forest science funding.

How research is commissioned

It was unclear how priorities are set for research programmes. The committee requests early sight of commissioning proposals coming forward. Clarity is needed on the criteria for assessing proposals and on the drivers for this – is it largely reactive or from horizon scanning?

Horizon scanning

The committee seeks concrete examples of how this is carried out and how it relates to the work of other bodies, such as DEFRA and the Horticultural sector. **This is hugely important in the light of the massive tree and forest health issues and climate change concerns facing the UK's trees and forests.** For example, it was unclear where responsibility for preventing importation of alien pests and diseases sits?

Action 4/13: Roger Coppock to present a paper to the next meeting on horizon scanning and priority setting.

Science and Innovation Strategy

The ECFS will not form a committee opinion in view of the late stage in the process but members will provide their personal responses.

Action 5/13: Committee members will send individual points to Veronica Cain for forwarding to Roger Coppock by Friday 18 October.

Research scientist evaluation

The committee would find it helpful to learn of the criteria used by FR in staff evaluation of scientists.

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Action 6/13: Peter Freer Smith to provide a paper on FR staff evaluation procedures for the next meeting.

Committee composition and modus operandi

Membership tenures - these are expected to last for 2 or 3 years, with the Chair being appointed for a 3 year period. In addition to committee work, members may be asked to undertake peer review of research programmes. This work will be fee paid.

Action 7/13: On-going membership and succession will be discussed at the September 2014 meeting.

The meeting closed at 12.25 pm Wednesday 9 October 2013.

DONM 30th January 2014 at Northern Research Station