

**THE FORESTRY COMMISSION ENGLAND EXECUTIVE BOARD
MINUTES OF THE 98TH MEETING
Conference Room, National Office, Bristol
30 October 2014**

Attendees:

Ian Gambles
Simon Hodgson
Steve Meeks
Richard Greenhous
Sarah England
Richard Barker
Dom Driver

Josh Roberts – Minute Secretary

1. Welcome

Ian Gambles opened the meeting. Apologies had been received from Mark Funnell and Mike Seddon.

2. Minutes and Actions

The minutes of the meeting on 08 July were reviewed and agreed.

Simon Hodgson confirmed that his action to sign off the Service Level Agreement between Forest Enterprise and National Office had been completed.

Mark Funnell was unavailable to confirm whether his action with John Tewson had been completed. It was agreed this would be pursued outside of the meeting.

Simon Hodgson reported that his action to engage with Forest Enterprise senior management team on the issue of providing feedback to candidates following interview was not complete. This action will therefore be carried forward. Dom Driver was unsure if the issue had been raised at Forest Services Board level and would confirm whether the action had been completed following the meeting. If it had not the action would be carried forward.

Action: Richard Greenhous and Simon Hodgson to have discussions with their senior management teams on improving feedback to staff following interview.

Sarah England and Mark Funnell had not completed their action to produce a communications plan. This action will be carried forward.

Action: Mark Funnell to produce a Comms plan with Sarah England focused around a few, hard, culture changing commitments.

3. Finance report

Steve Meeks updated the Board on the financial position as at the end of September (AP06).

The Board questioned whether the 1.9% was based on an RDEL budget net of the £8 million clawed back by Defra. Steve confirmed it was.

The Board noted that removal of the £8m might make it appear that funding of the Public Forest Estate had been cut substantially, although this was not in fact the case and we should be ready to explain the position if necessary.

Steve then updated the Board on the 2015/16 budgets, which were still being discussed with Defra colleagues.

Ian Gambles presented his view that the 1.9% should apply to all aspects of the Forestry Commission within the Defra vote budget, including the funding of cross-border functions. This led to a discussion on the pace of change of devolution, with the consensus being that the pace should increase. It was agreed that the Board should push harder to get to the pace that is required, subject to any necessary political decisions.

It was raised that Bob Macintosh, Director Forestry Commission Scotland, had announced his retirement, effective from February 2015. Implications of this were as yet unclear but that it formed part of the context of wider change.

Action: Ian G to write to Bob Macintosh and Jean Lindsay on these issues.

The Board then discussed the option of Defra NCS as a service provider. Richard Greenhous proposed that the FC should be engaged with NCS in a way that influenced its end conditions and made them more favourable to FC's needs in advance of FC having to use them.

The Board expressed its continued frustration at the programme/admin split in RDEL. Steve explained that it was largely out of the FCs control but that the FC was alive to opportunities to realign the split to a more favourable position.

The Board thanked Steve for his update.

4. Science and innovation

Dom Driver opened the item and apologised that no paper was available, explaining this was due to updates related to the status of the project.

Dom summarised the project so far, explaining that the project was now further on track to deliver the desired benefits following recent developments.

Dom reported that there was one remaining issue, which was related to the process of how external research would be signed off.

Dom reported that the current situation of the FC had made governance of the project particularly challenging. Partial devolution had resulted in countries acting more independently but without control of their own budgets.

Richard G commented that the current setup resulted in potential conflicts of interest for the Forestry Commission. As the parent department there was a responsibility to retain Forest Research in its current form, but also a need to get the most out of the limited research budget.

The Board commented that it had been useful to have these issues flagged up so that lessons could be learned and applied when implementing further devolution. This led to a discussion on the cross-border project. Ian commented that Dom's work had been very revealing in how the processes operate.

5. Briefing for new government

Richard Greenhous introduced Paper 24 and associated annexes. He invited discussion from the Board into what common assumptions the FC should be working to in preparing for a new government and to think about what England wants to achieve from any proposals.

Steve reassured the Board that he is planning to initiate a zero based review across FCE/CS to inform our funding discussions with Defra post the May 2015 election. He anticipates agreeing the process with Ian Gambles prior to a meeting of the FCE/CS senior management team on 18th November.

It was agreed that unnecessary work should be avoided and there was a potential risk this could occur, but that doing insufficient work to have options in place to present to a new government would have negative repercussions.

Ian Gambles expressed the view that financial and institutional scenarios were needed, that these should be started earlier and that they were closely linked.

Richard Barker commented the FC should respond to the manifestos of the major political parties and tailor scenario proposals to those key messages.

The Board discussed and agreed that Defra's brief to new ministers would be a very important step. Successfully feeding into this would be critical to success. The new closer working with Defra officials needed to provide this opportunity.

Ian reaffirmed the need to get into the policy debate and present options which would deliver what new government wanted and save money.

Richard G commented that defining the audience for the proposals should extend significantly beyond Defra. Proposals would be of interest to DECC and possibly DCLG.

The discussion concluded with the consensus to get guidance out, get groups together and aim to have proposals in hand by March.

6. Comms quarterly report

Ian Gambles opened the item to review the quarterly communications report and invited comments from the Board.

The Board expressed that there had been some good coverage of FC activity picked up by the media in this quarter.

Richard Barker raised the issue in the report that Forest Holidays has not been through judicial review, as was stated in the report. Rather, Forest Holidays is awaiting a report from the Planning Inspectorate and the decision of the Secretary of State for the Department of Local Communities and Government. The Board agreed that the changes should be made in the report.

7. Deer initiative

Dom Driver was asked to present the background and recommendations of the Forest Services' work to review the partnership with the Deer Initiative (DI) limited. Dom reminded the Board that the FC provided funding to the DI Ltd. to reduce the impact deer had on woodland. A recent review of the process had come to the conclusions that the policy remained stable but could be improved.

Dom explained the current scenario. It was agreed that the DI was a good way of achieving the desired outcomes, but whether it was the best way was unclear. It was acknowledged that the impacts of Deer in woodlands had increased in recent years.

It was reported that FS were proposing to initiate a 2015/16 competitive tender process to test whether better outcomes could be achieved. The Board discussed and agreed the approach.

8. AOB

ENC agenda

Ian Gambles invited discussion from the Board on standardising the agenda for the England National Committee. He presented a proposed agenda for the meeting and sought feedback.

It was agreed that the ENC should in general avoid discussing specific FEE issues where this would overlap with the Forest Enterprise Strategy Board. Ian and Simon should ensure the boards worked effectively together.

Ian gave the view that the principal role of the ENC is to set strategic direction for FCE, and it would be beneficial if the agenda reflected that.

Action: Board to provide feedback to Ian on the proposed ENC agenda before 11 November.

Annual reports

The Board discussed the practicalities and the benefits of publishing a separate annual report for FE, to aid in the development of FEE+. Steve commented that HMT and Defra have given authority to lay FEE's Annual Report & Accounts before Parliament separately from the rest of FCE/CS. The Board discussed the option and Simon H expressed strong views that a separate annual report should be produced and published for FEE. It was therefore agreed that this would be taken forward and that FEE's Annual Report and Accounts for 2014/15 would be laid separately.

Staffing

Sarah England reported to the Board on the HR capacity situation. She reported that this was set to improve. This news was welcomed by the Board.

Senior managers

Richard Barker raised a discussion point on the value for money provided by the annual senior managers meeting. It was agreed that there remained substantial value for money provided by the meeting, particularly next year with a new government. It was agreed however, that the funding arrangements for the meeting would change, with parts of the organisation now paying for their own attendance, travel and expenses and sharing venue hire.

Executive Office would still organise the event.

The Board discussed whether an invitation to the meeting should be extended to the analysts from Corporate and Forestry Support. It was agreed that it should, but that those expenses would need to be met by CFS budgets.

Holiday inn

Richard Barker raised a discussion on the FC's policy for hotel booking. A recent price rise by the Holiday Inn in Bristol meant it was now substantially above the policy rate. The Board agreed that no exception should be made for the hotel, or any hotel. The Board agreed that it should be up to the discretion of line managers to agree with their staff any hotel bookings above the standard rate.