

**FORESTRY COMMISSION ENGLAND
EIGHTIETH MEETING OF THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE
FORESTRY COMMISSION, BRISTOL
26 MAY 2016 AT 12.30 hrs**

Minutes

Present:

Sir Harry Studholme (Chairman)
Mary Barkham
Ian Gambles
Richard Greenhous
Simon Hodgson
Meirion Nelson
Tom Surrey
Clive Tucker

Also present:

PK Khaira-Creswell (Secretary and England SIRO)
Richard Barker (Minute Secretary)

Glenda Roberts (Item 5)
Jane Hull (Item 6)

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies had been received from Mark Pountain and Steve Meeks. Tom Surrey was substituting for Shirley Trundle and Meirion Nelson was standing in for Steve Meeks.

2. MINUTES OF THE MEETING ON 7 APRIL 2016

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed as a true record.

3. MATTERS ARISING/UPDATES

Plant Health

Richard Greenhous updated the Committee on plant health issues. Of note were *Phytophthora ramorum* on Sweet Chestnut, a developing concern, and survey work was ongoing with the spring programme of flights. The Oriental chestnut gall wasp in Kent had been found at much lower densities than the prior year, but more widely throughout Farningham Wood; additional surveying was being undertaken in the surrounding area to assess spread. It was noted that the main impact of the pest was to reduce chestnut productivity and reduce growth. The aim at this stage was to suppress the spread, not to achieve eradication, which was not regarded as feasible.

Woodland Creation

The planting figures had been published as scheduled, on 26 April. Grants were now 96% paid. Short term challenges to achieving planting targets continue but increasingly overcome. It remains expected that over the term of the program targets will be met.

Corporate Plan

PK Khaira-Creswell advised that the Corporate Plan would not now be published until after the EU Referendum.

4. FINANCE REPORT

Paper 13/16

Meirion Nelson highlighted the key points in the Paper, and added that Forest Research had received approval for an additional £1.4 million for capital works, primarily relating to the buildings at Alice Holt, which were currently in poor condition.

It was noted that the anticipated underspend on depreciation was ring fenced and would not be available to cover other pressures. Defra were routinely updated on the financial outturn, including progress and developments with the HMRC compliance audits.

5. ANNUAL REPORT AND ACCOUNTS 2015/16

Paper 14/16

The Committee accepted the recommendation from the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee, which had met earlier in the day, that the reports and accounts should be approved. The delay in laying was noted and that there may need to be a last minute amendment depending on the outcome of the EU referendum vote.

The Committee thanked Glenda Roberts and the team that had produced good reports and accounts to a very tight timescale.

6. URBAN FORESTRY

Paper 15/16

Jane Hull was welcomed to the meeting and drew out the key issues from the Paper. These included the locally diverse nature of urban forestry requiring different approaches in different places, and the existing strengths of the sector, with the Trees and Design Action Group, Institute of Chartered Foresters and the Arboriculture Association both having expertise.

The challenge for the Forestry Commission was to identify its role in urban forestry, which to date had been as a leader and facilitator without specific remit to lead. The three issues on which the Committee was being asked their views would help formulate the future approach.

The Committee made a range of suggestions, recognising that it is not an issue immediately associated with the Forestry Commission's remit. There is limited FC resource to promote the urban forest. Nevertheless, there was consensus that developing the evidence base, including making use of evidence produced by others, should continue. In addition efforts to bring this to the attention of relevant bodies should also remain a priority. A large number of small locally focused steps were considered more likely to be successful than any national programme.

Steps could also be taken to get more people to recognise that this was an area of interest to the Forestry Commission, an excellent step in this direction having been made by the Urban FWAC network and its recent publication. A more joined up approach across government, led at a ministerial level could help increase the recognition of the benefits that the urban forest can deliver for society.

There was some concern that there may be too much focus on new tree planting, without recognising the need for ongoing care and maintenance and the associated costs. This lack of ongoing commitment may result in resources being wasted on planting. Advocacy should include promoting immediate and long-term management.

The Committee recognised that with limited resources the Commission would only ever have a marginal role, but there were opportunities, for example in the 25 Year Environment Plan, to try and get across the positive urban forest message. Taking the opportunities as they arose should be seen as a realistic approach to achieving an impact, especially at a local level, rather than trying to find resources to fund a national planned engagement programme. Another route to influence change could be through engagement with the planning process, as development was an opportunity to implement green infrastructure. This engagement could be through planning professionals and their representative bodies, rather than engaging with individual development proposals.

Overall the National Committee supported the Commission's engagement in the urban forest at a level proportionate to the resources available and working to support and influence change through the actions of others. Jane Hull was thanked for bringing the issues to the attention of the Committee.

7. DEFRA 25 YEAR ENVIRONMENT PLAN FRAMEWORK

Tom Surrey reminded the Committee that the 25 Year Environment plan was to help deliver the vision for Britain to be the healthiest and the most beautiful place in the world to live, to work and to bring up a family. The plan was a commitment made by Government in the response to the third report of the Natural Capital Committee.

The framework to the plan had four aspects: to be modern, using data and technology; integrated, recognising that the environment was a complex system and that it would affect all bodies in the Defra group; local, with local actions and local ownership within an overall national plan; open, engaging anyone who wishes to participate.

The plan would be based around asset classes, including air, water, land and nature, forestry would, primarily be included in the land asset class. A high level framework was expected to be published before the summer parliamentary recess.

Ian Gambles added that much more had already been considered than would appear in the outline framework. This was because the framework was aiming to be as open as possible. More detail may have been seen as too restrictive at this early stage. Woodland cover and woodland creation was expected to appear and this would be a new opportunity to open up the debate on the type of forests we want in the future.

It was noted that the National Committee would have opportunities to engage further in the process as things progressed over the next few months.

8. FOREST HOLIDAYS AND CAMPING IN THE FOREST UPDATE Paper 10/16

Simon Hodgson drew the Committee's attention to the planning challenges faced by Forest Holidays and that proposals for third party sites had been placed on hold.

A recent development was the new trial of a 'green line permission', which would allow Forest Holidays to carry out recreation activities outside the lease area. This would not permit any development activity on this land and the arrangement would be evaluated over the year before any decision was taken on rollout to other sites.

9. AOB

FEE Timber Sales Review

An information note was provided to the Committee, summarising the review and outlining the next steps. The full report was available on request. Overall the conclusion was that there were no major problems, but there were some areas for improvement and a number of risks were identified, particularly the reliance on a small number of individuals which provided poor resilience in the event of staff loss for any reason.

It was noted that there was no direct comparison with private sector marketing, but the implication was that Forest Enterprise was not missing out on value; its main challenge was to control costs to increase margins.

EU Referendum Purdah

Ian Gambles reminded the Committee of the forthcoming purdah period which placed severe restrictions on the activities of the Forestry Commission, particularly in regard to public engagement, publicity and announcements in the period running up to the referendum. The Cabinet Office guidance, when published, would be circulated to Committee members.

Future Meetings:

13 July – Bristol (after the FESB)

14 September – Bristol (no other meetings currently planned on this day)