

**FORESTRY COMMISSION ENGLAND
SEVENTY THIRD MEETING OF THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE
FORESTRY COMMISSION, BRISTOL
23 APRIL 2015 AT 13.30 hrs**

Minutes

Present:

Sir Harry Studholme (Chair)
Mary Barkham
Ian Gambles
Richard Greenhous
Simon Hodgson
Steve Meeks
Mark Pountain
Tom Surrey
Clive Tucker

Also present:

Richard Barker
Mark Funnell
Josh Roberts (minute secretary)

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

Harry Studholme welcomed the Committee to the meeting, passing on Keith Oates apologies.

2. MINUTES OF THE MEETING ON 4 FEBRUARY 2015

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

3. MATTERS ARISING/UPDATES

Business Plans

Paper 07/15 Revised

The Committee confirmed that the Business Plans had been cleared by correspondence and noted that the covering paper had been amended and would be published in the normal way.

CAP Reform

Richard Greenhous gave an update on implementing Countryside Stewardship. He confirmed that July remained the launch date for multiannual agreements. Richard Greenhous informed the Committee of changes following the challenges with the online service for Rural Payments, Defra NExCo had approved a proposition, agreed by the Chief Executives of FC, NE and RPA, which will see Natural England lead on the set up and delivery of Countryside Stewardship during the first year of the scheme, using a paper based system for applications. This is to ensure a successful launch of Countryside Stewardship in July as planned. This meant that those FC staff members

who had been due to move to the RPA in York in June might instead be loaned to Natural England for the period, until the transactional functions are established in RPA. Richard Greenhous informed the Committee that the decisions taken previously which had resulted in the current plans to move to a two administrative hub system for Forest Services remained valid and would continue to be implemented. Defra and the Chief Executives of NE, FC and RPA continue to work closely together to ensure that this revision to the implementation approach reflects the needs of our customers and are considerate of the people impacts.

Plant Health (including Tree Health Communications Strategy)

Richard Greenhous gave an update on Oak Processionary Moth (OPM) and Chalara dieback of ash. Richard confirmed that the Royal Botanic gardens at Kew had reported the first OPM eggs had hatched a few weeks previously. He also reported on the FS Board's recent visit to Norfolk, where they had visited one of Forest Research's ash die back resistance trial plots and an affected Norfolk Wildlife Trust woodland.

Mark Funnell gave a short presentation on the Tree Health Communications Strategy, introduced the re-launched TreeAlert website for reporting pests and disease in the wider environment, and summarised Oak Processionary Moth communications plans for spring 2015. The committee discussed the link between communication and action which occurred as a result of that communication.

The committee discussed the feedback provided to people who reported pests and diseases through Tree Alert.

Clive Tucker highlighted the work of the National Tree Safety Group (NTSG), which he chairs and links to tree health.

Action: Mark Funnell agreed to liaise with Clive Tucker about joining up communication of the NTSG's work on tree health with wider tree health communications.

FINANCE REPORT

Paper 08/15

Steve Meeks introduced Paper 08/15, highlighting key areas for the Committee's attention and consideration.

The provisional outturn for 2014/15 indicates a minor £480k (1.2%) underspend on Resource DEL, which was recognised as a creditable achievement.

Good progress is being maintained on the production of the 2014/15 Annual Report and Accounts, which is on track to meet the key deadlines for laying and publishing. Recognition was given to the risk posed by the forthcoming election due to uncertainties around clearance and possible last minute narrative changes.

Although the 2015/16 budget is in place, the possibility of in-year adjustments following the election of a new government in May was noted.

The committee discussed the VAT tax assessments arising from discoveries during the current HMRC VAT and PAYE compliance audits. Steve Meeks confirmed that all substantive assessments raised to date by HMRC had been settled or paid on account in 2014/15, with any associated penalties suspended pending confirmation of conditions being introduced to achieve compliance. The 'Westminster' share of this was of the order of £1 million. A cross-FC Tax Working Group, chaired by Steve Meeks and reporting to Director Central Services, has been set up and formal monthly meetings arranged with HMRC. Additional VAT expertise is being brought into FC and contracts will be let for external tax advice. The audits have been ongoing for around two years and may take around another two years to complete. The committee discussed the possibility of further liabilities including within FEE. The progress in improving controls and strengthening VAT expertise within the commission was important but until the audit is complete the full extent of any liability can not be quantified. The committee asked to be kept updated with progress.

4. WORKING WITH NATURAL ENGLAND

Paper 09/15

Richard Greenhous introduced this item inviting the Committee's views on FC England's current joint working with NE, its future development and how the Committee wishes to support this. The Committee welcomed the paper and discussed its wider context. The Committee welcomed the practical steps already being taken to increase joint working between NE and FC, its efficiency and effectiveness, at local and national levels and encouraged more of this. Opportunities were highlighted for increased joint working not only on biodiversity but also on other issues such as access and landscapes. Opportunities also existed for FC and NE to work jointly with a wider range of other organisations. Joint working on evidence was already a strength. The Chairman had had a positive meeting with Andrew Sells the Natural England Chairman on 20th April. The Committee suggested that a meeting with the NE's Board at an appropriate time would give further overt backing to the organisations' partnership, ideally around a specific successful joint initiative.

Action: Ian Gambles to discuss with CEO NE possible engagement between ENC and NE board members

5. FOREST HOLIDAYS

Paper 10/15

Ian Gambles introduced this item by reminding the Committee that Forest Holidays is an important part of the estate's business portfolio and its activities deliver against multiple social and economic objectives. This agenda item was to ensure that there was clarity about the process and level of approval for new developments and that the correct accountability was in place. The process applied equally to Forest Holidays and Camping in the Forest (CITF), although CITF have not yet brought forward new site proposals.

Simon Hodgson provided some additional background on how the business had developed over the last 10 years, and how the relationship had evolved.

The Committee acknowledged the questions that had been raised by a member of the public in regard to the level at which approval for new developments had been given and

the role of the National Committee. Richard Barker gave a comprehensive explanation of how the current approvals process had evolved, particularly as a result of the 2008 Development Working Group Report. The current procedures were now as set out in EMGN4. As noted in the Paper, and recognised by the Committee, formal approval was a decision taken by the Chief Executive, Forest Enterprise.

In response to a question about new development approvals as Forest Enterprise became a more separate and distinct body, with a view to becoming a separate organisation if Parliament so decided, it was noted that approval would remain with the Chief Executive until any alternative arrangement was agreed; further consideration would be needed in due course in the context of the wider arrangements for the proposed new body. . It was also suggested that EMGN4 could be reviewed and simplified as it was difficult to follow as it tried to cover every situation and all eventualities. This should be done alongside the work that the Head of Estates was undertaking, as set out in paragraph 8 of the paper, which was supported by the Committee.

The Committee noted and confirmed their agreement to the approval process for major recreation development on the Public Forest Estate, including Forest Holidays and Camping in the Forest. It was further agreed that Ian Gambles would write to the member of the public who had raised issues with the Committee and reassure them that the Committee was satisfied that approval should be by the Chief Executive Forest Enterprise and that any deficiencies in the formal recording of this process were being addressed.

The Committee also discussed and noted the Commissioners' plans to establish a formal selection process for the Forestry Commission nominated member of the Forest Holidays board.

Actions: Mark Street to conduct review of processes as set out in Paper 10/15 and above. Ian Gambles to write on behalf of the Committee in response to correspondence received.

6. APPOINTMENTS TO THE ARBORETUM ADVISORY COMMITTEE Paper 11/15

The Committee accepted the recommendation and gave their approval for the re-appointment of the three Advisory Committee members.

7. FORESTRY COMMISSION APPOINTED NEW FOREST VERDERER Paper 12/15

The Committee agreed the recommendation to re-appoint Mr Dowsett as the Forestry Commission's appointed New Forest Verderer.

8. AOB (5 Minutes)

Harry Studholme informed the Committee that they had received a request from Amanda Bryan, a Forestry Commissioner in Scotland and member of the National Committee Scotland, for representatives of the National Committee for Scotland to attend a meeting of ENC as observers. The Committee were content.

Harry Studholme thanked the committee for attending and closed the meeting at 16:25

Future Meetings:

4 June 2015 – Bristol

22 July - Bristol