

**FORESTRY COMMISSION ENGLAND
EIGHTY SEVENTH MEETING OF THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE
NATIONAL OFFICE BRISTOL
12 JULY 2017 AT 13.00hrs**

Minutes

Present:

Sir Harry Studholme (Chairman)
Mary Barkham
Ian Gambles
Julia Grant
Richard Greenhous
Paddy Harrop
Steve Meeks
Mark Pountain
Margaret Read
Clive Tucker

Also present:

David Cross – Item 6
Dorothy Russell – Item 7

Richard Barker - Secretary and England SIRO

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting. Simon Hodgson had sent his apologies and Paddy Harrop was attending in his place. Shirley Trundle was unable to attend and Margaret Read was attending in her place.

2. MINUTES OF THE MEETING ON 1 JUNE 2017

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

3. MATTERS ARISING/UPDATES

Plant Health

Richard Greenhous updated the Committee on the discovery of Sweet Chestnut Blight in the Bexley area of London and other sites nearby. It appeared that it had been established in the area for some time. The Bexley site would be a very challenging one on which to carry out control measures. Further surveillance would help inform the response.

Surveillance had largely shown only a small increase in *Phytophthora* in areas where this was to be expected. A Plant Health Notice had recently been served on Bradford

Metropolitan District Council for Milner Spring Wood, Bingley. This was an area of high public access and is expected to receive some publicity when the felling takes place. Significant spread in Wales with risk of spread into England had been discussed recently by the Commissioners and consideration given to escalating this to ministers.

Oak Processionary Moth season had progressed as expected with new findings to date only where might have been expected.

How the Forestry Commission would play its part in responding to an wider environment finding of *Xylella fastidiosa* was due to be discussed soon with core Defra plant health policy, including concerns about how to resource the large scale and long duration of response required.

The long awaited Plant Health Resilience Plan was now making some progress, but it was still at an early stage.

NAO Investigation – New Forest Verderers HLS

Steve Meeks reported the latest update from NAO. It was continuing to assess the level of scientific detail it should become involved with after having received further information from the MP, but was hoping to share its draft report with us within the next week.

Future of the Forestry Commission

Ian Gambles gave an update on progress towards submitting the proposals to Ministers. The draft Submission, which was seeking key decisions on the Future Operating Model, was currently being circulated round Defra officials to get their engagement and support. It was still anticipated that it would be submitted to Ministers before recess and that key decisions could then be taken by September and the proposed actions started to be implemented.

The Forestry and Land Management Bill in Scotland was progressing and it was anticipated that it would complete the parliamentary process in 2018, with implementation of the new arrangements from April 2019. The Governance Project Board had agreed, subject to Ministerial approval, new arrangements for Forest Research.

The overall picture was positive, but there would be Ministerial hurdles to clear, and it was expected that the new Secretary of State would take a significant interest and have his own views on the issues.

4. NEW GOVERNMENT UPDATE

Margaret Read advised that Committee that the new Secretary of State was taking a first principles approach and would explore the underlying details of an issue before making a decision. He was also had a higher political profile than any Defra Secretary

of State for a long time, which would present its own challenges. Retaining the previous junior Ministerial team was providing some continuity.

The Committee discussed the likely approach to a number of issues; afforestation was expected to continue as a priority, including the prospect of increasing the Public Forest Estate through new woodland creation. The 25 Environment Plan would continue to be developed, but the approach may have evolved. It was not clear whether or not the Forest Forum would be continued. The 11 million tree commitment remained and a new commitment to an additional million trees in towns and cities had been added. Consideration of how this would be achieved was at a very early stage.

5. FINANCE REPORT

Paper 20/17

Steve Meeks drew attention to the forecast variances and the reasons for these. The aim for the Woodland Carbon Fund was to re-profile so that it was available in future years as work to encourage applications continued.

The Annual Report and Accounts, which had now been certified by the C&AG were expected to be laid on Monday 17 July.

Pressure for further savings was anticipated in 2018/19 and in 2019/20 as part of the response to Defra's budget gap, and the Treasury's Efficiency Review which was looking at 3% and 6% reductions in Departmental budgets. This work was being handled through Defra's Outcome System Groups.

The current position with Internal Audit was outlined; GIAA were progressing with Q1 and Q2 activities where these were across the Defra group, but the Head of Internal Audit for the FC is to be re-recruited and other posts had not yet been filled. There was concern at the lack of a dedicated FC GIAA team and that organisation specific issues were slipping. Steve Meeks would be pressing the issues at a meeting scheduled with Nathan Paget in the coming week. In addition Ian Gambles would write to him setting out his Accounting Officer concerns that the necessary reassurance on key issues may not be achieved without urgent action.

6. CORPORATE PLAN PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Paper 21/17

David Cross joined the meeting and took the Committee through the highlights of the Performance Indicators' report.

There was some discussion on the nature of some of the indicators and whilst it was accepted that consistency was needed in order to show change over time, some of the indicators had very little meaning. An example of this was the number of businesses in operation on the Public Forest Estate, which gave no indication of value or level of employment, issues that would be more informative. However, it was also recognised that this level of detail would be much more difficult to collect.

It was noted that indicators were generally reviewed at times of significant policy changes and the Committee agreed that it would be appropriate to look at the indicators in detail as part of the organisational change linked to devolution.

7. WORKFORCE PLANNING

Paper 22/17

Dorothy Russell joined the meeting and gave a short presentation explaining workforce planning process that was underway and gave more details of the initial stages that were currently underway. It was explained that the Forestry Commission had been mostly looking at short term need, but a longer term approach was now required with the change in the labour market and employee expectations as well as the changing needs of the Forestry Commission as the organisation evolved. It had also been recognised that the profile of the existing work force, especially in terms of knowledge transfer and expected retirement dates, would present some challenges which had to be built into future business planning cycle as a part of a continuous process.

The Committee welcomed the overall approach and sought clarification on a number of issues, including how rewards and benefits could help retention, especially where knowledge transfer was a significant issue. Reassurance was also given that workforce planning would be linked to the organisation's long term strategic plans, which would have different needs in terms of skills and experience to the organisation's current requirements. It was suggested that more use could also be made of the appraisal system to help understand career aspirations and to explain opportunities.

It was likely that a different approach would need to be taken to the potential source of skills, looking beyond than the traditional areas. There would also need to be engagement with education and training providers through to exploring the opportunities for employing older workers. Changes in working patterns would also need to be taken into account, for example flexible retirement and part time working to help knowledge transfer.

8. FESB UPDATE

Paddy Harrop gave an update on the all staff briefing which had set out how things were changing in Forest Enterprise, a process which had been well received. It was also the start of the business planning round for 2018-19, which would also look at the following four years.

The Committee was advised that Forest Enterprise had faced some recent criticism over the lease of a small area of land in Surrey for oil test drilling where protestors had recently been evicted and for permitting seismic surveying on the estate in Nottinghamshire. However, both activities were aligned to wider government policies and did not compromise the management of the estate.

The Natural Capital Accounts, were nearing completion, this was the second year they had been produced and they were not expected to be substantially different to the first year.

The newly published Tree Spotters Guide, published by Penguin in association with Westons, which had been written by the FE's Dendrologist Dan Crowley, was recommended to the Committee.

9. FOREST HOLIDAYS and CAMPING IN THE FOREST

Paper 23/17

Paddy Harrop highlighted the current trading conditions and planning issues which were noted by the Committee. In answer to questions on the impacts of devolution on the Forestry Commission's share of the business it was explained that it would need agreement of all parties to make changes and that it was in everyone's interest to work together to resolve the complexities of ownership.

10. AOB

FWAC Appointments

Paper 24/17

The Committee approved the appointment of Christine Reid and Charles Robinson to the East midlands FWAC and Dr Anne Wheeler to the West Midlands FWAC.

Next Meeting: 20 September in Bristol

15 November in Bristol (after FESB)