

Agenda Item 7

Memo 05/15

## COMMISSIONERS' MEETING

19 March 2015

### ENGLAND COUNTRY REPORT

#### **Rural Development Programme for England – Woodland Capital Grants 2015**

FCE successfully launched the first element of the RDPE on 17 February. This covers capital grants for woodland creation, management plans and tree health issues. This interim offer is being administered by Forest Services using an adaptation to GLOS, but new applicant guidance is available on gov.uk. The new grant offer has been positively received by stakeholders, and welcomed by Defra as the first part of the new programme to go live.

#### **Reshaping Forest Services**

Following FCTU and staff consultation, decisions on changes to FS were announced on 5<sup>th</sup> February. The most significant decision is that FS administrative hubs will be reduced in number from 5 to 2 by April 2018. The two hubs will be located in Exeter (Bullers Hill) and Farnham (Bucks Horn Oak). Staff in the York hub will transfer to the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) from 1 June 2015, as RPA will be administering payments under the new RDPE from the York site. Worcester hub will close as the current Worcester site is vacated by Defra, expected to be January 2016. Santon Downham hub is planned to close at end 2017/18.

#### **Big Tree Plant completion**

The Big Tree Plant is a national campaign which was launched in December 2010, to increase the number of trees planted in towns, cities and neighbourhoods throughout England, so as to make them more attractive, and healthier places to live in; particularly in areas of greatest deprivation where there was little greenery. It brought together a partnership of national organisations who already plant trees, as well as civic and community groups working with Defra and the Forestry Commission. The Big Tree Plant's one million tree target has been achieved thanks to these massive efforts of planting in over 3,300 sites across England. Secretary of State Elizabeth Truss helped school children plant the one millionth tree in Bristol on 5<sup>th</sup> February 2015.

#### **Forest Holidays**

In December 2014 the Department for Communities and Local Government wrote to Forest Holidays refusing planning permission for the proposed cabin development at Delamere. Forest Holidays have decided to proceed with a statutory challenge of the Secretary of State's decision and have served formal papers on all interested parties. In February 2015 the local planning committee refused permission for the proposed cabin development at Fineshade Woods in Northamptonshire. Forest Holidays intend to appeal.

## **Woods into Management**

The England National Committee in February considered a strategy paper on FC's objective of bringing more woodlands into management. Among the positive developments discussed and supported by ENC are:

### *Stobart Biomass Initiative*

Prompted by the work of the North West Forestry Forum and supported by the Mersey Forest and three Local Enterprise Partnerships, Stobart Group are working in partnership with Forest Services to develop significant new sources of (wood) biomass supply to their Stobart Biomass arm. Its aim is to build over the next 7 years or so, a sustainable supply of timber from under-managed woodland of up to 500,000 tonnes of timber per annum, and in turn, generating over 400 jobs. This is an ambitious undertaking, and one which could provide a major step forward in bringing 1000's of hectares of England's woodlands into management. To underpin and kick-start the project, Stobart submitted a bid for £5.5 million to the Regional Growth Fund which was successful, resulting in a conditional offer from BIS. Agreeing the provisional offer will need to be done by 27 March and the final offer by 17 July. Over the next few months the project will have to demonstrate that it is state aids compliant and undertake due diligence work. The deadline for a due diligence report now being 15 May. Forest Services, along with other partners, will help Stobart to develop their evidence base, targeting of under-managed woodlands and operational shape of the project. Forest Services will also be supporting Stobart to develop their approach to landowners and agents, which will be initially focused on the North West & West Midlands, but could eventually impact across England.

### *Engagement with Local Enterprise Partnerships*

The continuing momentum behind the Roots to Prosperity initiative in the north of England, strongly supported by local LEPs as well as Ministers, MPs, and local authorities, is very positive news for the sector. Announcements that significant funds are to be invested in woodfuel initiatives by two LEPs in the south of England – Coast to Capital in Sussex and Enterprise M3 in Surrey and Hampshire – provide a further boost, and will make a significant contribution to bringing management back into an area where there is significant under-management and overstood supply.

### *Practical Action Project*

The Practical Action Project aims to identify and engage with owners of under managed woodland to increase woodland management activity in England. A pilot conducted in the South West from May to December 2014 involved a series of workshops and development of mapping, training and GIS tools. In the South West area there are approximately 252,150 ha of woodland, of which around 126,390 ha were unmanaged – 50%. The FS team selected 15 cluster areas, each with a detailed action plan, to prioritise strategic action, and engaged with owners of around 3,000 unmanaged blocks of woodland, a total of 17,116 ha. The pilot work is being refined and will be rolled out to the other Forest Services Areas by end May 2015. If the wider roll-out can achieve success across the country, a 7-14% increase in woodland in active management over the next three years is possible.

## **Forest Enterprise England +**

This year sees the introduction of new governance structures for Forest Enterprise (FE). This represents an important step in its transition to become more autonomous. A new Strategy Board has

replaced the current Forest Enterprise England Management Board and will set the overall direction for FE. A significant change is that among its members are two Non-Executives drawn from the England National Committee. This high-level representation will ensure there is a greater level of external scrutiny and transparency, as well as welcome additional expertise to help FE plan for the future. The Executive Team, made up of senior National staff, will guide and manage FE, setting and managing business priorities and allocating resources. It will report into the Strategy Board, and underneath it will sit a new Business Management Board (including Forest District Managers) which aims to ensure that the senior managers running FE develop an increasing focus on working together, sharing expertise and making delivery decisions that work in the best possible way on the ground.

The next phase in the FE transition project is to establish national office structures for the marketing and operations teams. This will involve changes for some staff in the coming year. The senior FE Team has also started work on a new Strategic Prospectus. This will set out how FE will evolve as an organisation over the next 2-3 years.

### **Appointment of new Non-Executive Member of ENC**

Mark Pountain CBE was appointed as a new Non-Executive member to the England National Committee in January, replacing William Weston whose term of office had come to an end. Mark has had a military career, his last appointment in the Army being as Director of Manning, and brings substantial experience in management and organisation at an important stage in the development of FCE.

### **Plane Wilt, London**

A London Tree Officers Association survey of plane trees to check for presence of Plane Wilt (*Ceratocystis fimbriata f. platini*) covered nearly 3000 trees across 33 boroughs. There were no findings of Plane Wilt. It is intended to extend the survey using a similar approach in other cities in southern England during 2015. The disease has caused devastation to plane trees in France, but is unrecorded in the UK, which is now a protected zone.