

MINUTES OF THE 907<sup>TH</sup> MEETING OF  
THE FORESTRY COMMISSIONERS  
BOARDROOM, BSW TIMBER MILL, CORPACH  
25<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 2014

Present

Harry Studholme (Chair), Amanda Bryan, Ian Gambles, Hamish Macleod, Bob McIntosh, Keith Oates, Wilma Harper, Jean Lindsay

Also Attending

Fiona Alexander (Minutes); Jo O'Hara (Observer); John Risby (Observer)

**1. Introduction and Apologies**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. No apologies were received.

The Chair thanked Hamish Macleod and BSW Timber for their hospitality and tour of the timber mill.

**2. Minutes of 19 June 2014**

The minutes were agreed as a true record.

**3. Matters Arising**

i) Appointments

The Secretary of State has met the three appointable candidates for the vacant England role. Once the preferred candidate has been selected by the Secretary of State and confirmed by the PM Office, the FC will progress the appointment process. The sift for the Non-executive Commissioner for Scotland will be carried out on 10 October.

**4. Current Operating Environment of the Forestry Commission**

The meeting discussed the current operating environment of the FC in light of the result of the Scottish Referendum. In England, discussions on the Woodland Policy Enabling Programme and Cross Border Project are continuing. The meeting agreed the National Committees would continue to monitor and respond to the operating environment in their respective countries, including requests from Ministers for information or briefings, and would keep the Board informed.

## **5. Forest Holidays Governance**

The meeting discussed the Internal Audit review of Forest Holidays Governance noting the recommendations made, in particular the need for the FC to maintain its reputation and to effectively manage both positive and negative communications.

The meeting heard that generally, planners were supportive of new site proposals however, there has been some opposition to new sites e.g. Delamere where the outcome of the enquiry is expected shortly. New sites are required to maintain a reasonable development pipeline for Forest Holidays and the FC, and the FC would want to ensure that any new sites were of good quality and that high standards were maintained. The meeting noted that quality is an important issue for the FC and current cabin sites are good, environmentally friendly, and provide many benefits for the local economy.

## **6. Science and Innovation Strategy Delivery**

The Science and Innovation Strategy was published and adopted in March 2014 and since its publication, the FC has been engaging with stakeholders. A Research Brief with key outcomes has been produced and had been discussed by the Research Strategy Management Board (RSMB) the previous week.

The RSMB had not signed off the brief and had asked Corporate and Forestry Support and Forest Research to engage further with the country policy leads in preparing a series of research proposals. By the end of October, FR would prepare a document setting out the proposed programme structure and how these relate to the original Science and Innovation Strategy research areas. It would be at a fairly high level indicating the rationale, research challenges and high level deliverables addressed by each programme. At the same time, CFS would provide an outline of the externally commissioned research to complement the work being provided by FR. These would be progressed and discussed with country policy leads and CFS analysts with a view to submitting to the RSMB for their sign off. The Expert Committee on Forest Science, who gave advice on the Research Brief, will scrutinise each programme to ensure that the science quality is up to standard.

The meeting heard that the process has been difficult due to the very different natures, political environments, and drivers of the various organisations involved. However, the work has brought many organisations together and helped them to identify priorities and areas where research can be joined up.

The meeting noted that this was an important deliverable for cross-border work and agreed that periodic updates would be useful.

## **7. William Robinson Gravetye Charity**

The meeting heard that four applicants for the role of Trustee were interviewed in July. Two of the interviewees had relevant skills and experience to bring to the Gravetye Board. The Commissioners agreed the appointments of the two new Trustees, each for a three-year term commencing 23 October 2014.

## **8. Director Central Services Report**

The meeting considered the report noting:

- i) Increased funding for Plant Health has resulted in a better interception rate of potential pests in imported material;
- ii) The Climate Change Model developed and used by Forest Research has been audited and approved by UN Climate Change;
- iii) The Interim Report of the Cross Border Project will be presented to the Programme Board in October;
- iv) Natural Resources Wales is withdrawing from some Forestry Commission services and discussions on the transition plans are on-going;
- v) James Pendlebury was awarded an Honorary Professorship by Highlands and Islands University;
- vi) The recently completed Equal Pay Audit showed that the differential has dropped from 22% to 9%;
- vii) The 2015 pay remit has been submitted to Ministers and it is hoped to start pay discussions with the Trade Union Side in October;
- viii) HMRC are continuing with their audits on FC processes including taxable benefits and VAT. This is a resource-intensive exercise for the FC and has highlighted an issue with our knowledge and understanding of tax and VAT within the FC.

## **9. Director England Report**

The meeting considered the report noting:

- i) The bid for the Trailblazer scheme has been successful;
- ii) The culling of boar has highlighted some risk to staff with on-line harassment and one physical attack;
- iii) Some new instances of Chalara have been found in Northamptonshire and Alice Holt but it has been difficult to find a spread pattern;
- iv) Any change to the structure of FE is unlikely to move forward before the next election and the delay of legislation means that the business case has not yet been approved. Work continues on developing FE Plus to ensure appropriate governance is in place;
- v) The focus for Forest Services is on the EU payment changes which were announced in December 2013 but not yet implemented. Changes to the payment system will see the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) take responsibility for transactional work and this will have an effect on FC staff.

## **10. Director Scotland Report**

The meeting considered the report noting:

- i) The new SRDP grant scheme is almost ready to go with a planned implementation date of 1 January 2015;
- ii) The recently published Community Empowerment Bill may impact on FC Scotland's ability to sell public estate land to communities at full land value;

- iii) The Land Reform Bill may require FC Scotland to register all their land onto the Land Register within the next five years. This is likely to be a very significant and costly task.

## **11. Any Other Business**

In reply to a query on the FC providing landscape advice to Forest Holidays, the meeting heard that it is within FC powers to provide forestry-related services to other organisations.

## **12. Date of Next Meeting**

16 and 17 December 2014 in London.