**SCOTTISH FORESTRY EXECUTIVE TEAM**

**Minutes (Official)**

**26 September 2023, Saughton House, Meeting Room P1-1 and Teams Meeting**

**SET Attendees:**

Paul Lowe (PL) – Chair

Brendan Callaghan (BC)

Alan Hampson (AH)

Ross Machardie (RM)

Jonathan Taylor (JT)

James Aldred (JA) – minutes

**Apologies:**

Zahid Deen (ZD)

**In Attendance:**

Helen McKay (HM), Chief Forester

Kevin MacMillan (KM), Head of Project Management Office – substituting for ZD

Marelle Dalziel (MD), HR Business Partner, for item 2

Bastian Altrock (BA), Future Working & Corporate Sustainability Manager, for item 4

1. **Minutes and actions of previous meeting**

The minutes of the 28th June meeting were approved.

On outstanding actions, JT reported that responsibility for the Business Continuity Plan had been formally transferred to the post of Information Governance Manager, who was working with SF’s Digital Business Partner to make updates to the Plan, including those related to the transition to Saughton House and the migration to Office 365. The revised Plan would come back to SET for signoff. The action was noted as closed on this basis.

On actions arising from the June minutes:

* **Request from non-executive advisors for a meeting with PL regarding audit findings and woodland creation performance:** PL noted that this had taken place; action closed.
* **Proposed timetabling of Process Efficiency Project – Long Term Forest Plans:** KM reported that this was ongoing.
* **Review of interaction between SF and the Agriculture Reform Programme on the development and implementation of future grant support for forestry:** BC noted that dialogue was underway with the relevant support team and that a future approach and associated governance arrangements were yet to be confirmed. Key challenges included the complexity of IT support for a future grant scheme, and the identification of appropriate SF involvement in Agriculture governance bodies and approaches without causing inefficiencies. **Updated action: BC/AH to shape key challenges and propose approach to SET.**
* **Vacant improvement conservator role and woodland creation resourcing:** Noted that SET had discussed resourcing requirements outside the meeting, with proposals underway to recruit to the vacant role, create a new Head of Woodland Creation Regulation, and consider additional posts for the facilitation of the training project. BC undertook to circulate these proposals by correspondence for SET approval.
* **Circulation of team plan templates:** noted as continuing open.

**Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan 2023/2024 Update**

MD presented the report, noting that comms were planned regarding the upcoming planned Women and Leadership sessions. PL encouraged SET members to champion and encourage attendance at the sessions.

On recruitment to new posts, MD noted that for posts at PB3 and above, recruitment managers were being encouraged to seek support from external organisations (e.g. Changing the Chemistry) in ensuring recruitment was open to and encouraged a wide demography of applicants. Discussion ensued around the current competency-based approach and whether an alternative approach such as allowing application via CV and covering letter might widen the pool of potential applicants; MD noted that this had been trialled but had resulted in a lower quality of applications than the standard application-based process. PL recommended that the SG Public Appointments Team might be able to provide advice on how to better attract external candidates.

On Scottish Government equality networks, PL noted that it had historically been difficult to nominate SF officers due to SF’s separate pay and conditions approach. MD reported that opportunities were being explored, but that the approach would depend on SF’s future HR arrangements. PL requested that an update be included in the next report.

**Risk Register: quarterly review ahead of planned risk appetite workshop**

JT noted that the register had not been significantly updated due to the imminent review of the underlying risk appetite statement at the planned workshop, which was due to take place in early November, after which the register updates would resume. An update would also be made to the next Audit & Assurance Committee meeting in December.

PL asked SET to consider in advance of the workshop whether there were any high-level strategic risks not currently covered by the register.

**Future Working Recommendations**

BA spoke to the report, noting positive support across the organisation for the current hybrid working approach and noting the recommended actions to address the identified challenges.

PL noted SET’s thanks for the team’s work to date in successfully navigating the post-pandemic world of work.

In discussion, SET members noted that the increased flexibility on staff base locations could increase SF’s exposure to costs when bringing people together, and had led to some potential unfairness in travel expenses. BA noted that HR was working on a review of location guidance policy which would hopefully address these issues.

In response to queries on Saughton House occupancy under the proposed new model, BA noted that data would be available once the new model had been implemented.

HM raised the issue of dealing with managerial issues in a hybrid environment, noting that intervention might be needed quickly and in person. PL noted that this would likely be dealt with under HR policies that would supersede the hybrid approach where appropriate.

**SET approved** the report’s recommendations **and requested** that an implementation plan be developed and submitted to SET, with the points on base locations and managerial interventions addressed. PL requested that a message be drafted from SET to staff noting the planned implementation timescales and providing clear messaging for staff and managers around the principles of the approach.

* **Action: BA to produce and submit implementation plan to a future SET meeting.**

**Discussion on woodland creation action plan and follow-up from workshops and next steps**

SET discussed the outcomes from the recent workshops and the key points arising.

JT noted the need to produce an action plan and map across to other inputs such as the responses to the future grant support consultation. PL noted the need for a clear understanding of work being delivered across the range of activities and approaches being taken to improve woodland creation, and the need to be able to communicate that picture and actions/success to staff and stakeholders. An overarching narrative was needed that incorporated activities such as the Improvement Programme as well as business-as-usual work, with a forward delivery plan and communication approach for Ministers, stakeholders and staff.

BC noted a separate discussion amongst SET member on roles/posts that were linked to woodland creation, including the filling of the vacant Improvement Conservator, the recruitment of Woodland Create and Case Support Manager, and subject to final approval a new Head of Woodland Creation. The SET noted its support for this and that BC would circulate the details. KM noted the importance of Improvement Conservator role as it linked to taking forward L&D and skills development.

* **Action: BC to circulate the table of woodland creation posts.**

HM noted the recent changes to climate change targets in England, and the potential need to consider messaging for UK-wide audiences about developments in Scotland.

AH noted the need for meaningful engagement with the forestry sector as well as manageable expectations from the sector.

AH noted that the cumulative impact of woodland creation together with onshore wind development and nature restoration could lead to tensions and transaction costs. Similarly, limiting woodland creation’s impact on prime agricultural land relied on the Agricultural Reform Programme working well and understanding how farming subsidies drove behaviour. PL suggested that these risks be articulated and escalated via the Land Transformation Board, among other routes.

On resourcing, KM reported that the Improvement & Delivery Steering Group had taken a heat map approach to resourcing and was starting to implement detailed resourcing assessments at project level, but that not all elements (e.g. future grant support) were covered at present.

On communications and messaging, PL noted the need for a front-foot communications approach to declare progress on planting and project a narrative of change, improvement and delivery. Regarding supporting information, BC noted that the current website content was insufficient and confusing; PL suggested a possible microsite approach to provide the necessary supporting information and guidance. JT noted the availability of APS as design agency for any action plan and supporting narrative.

BC noted that audiences and segmentation could need further nuance: for example, a message to the forestry sector of processing more applications more quickly could read negatively to community groups if it suggested applications were being scrutinised less closely.

AH noted the upcoming Woodland Creation Summit as a key point of contact with the forestry sector and a likely source of actions towards improved woodland creation performance. HM noted some actions in hand regarding forestry careers that were likely to see implementation post-Summit in November. The issue of governance around woodland creation was discussed, with a view that this needed further refinement, especially around the interdependencies of work areas and clarity on points were decisions were made.

* **Action:** **AH to liaise with Executive Office on arranging pre-summit meeting of SET and others as required to discuss expectations, handling and potential outcomes from the upcoming Woodland Creation Summit.**
* **Action:** **JT & KM to work on an action plan, a ‘Routemap’ and update the communications approach.**

**Discussion on use of grant budget to fund resourcing**

RM introduced the paper, noting the previously agreed levels of budget pressure; projected overspends in resource budgets; and potential upcoming savings requirements from Scottish Government Finance.

If those requirements did not come forward, the projected overspends could be covered from projected underspends in woodland creation budgets. BC noted that on the basis of the latest clearing round, drawing wholly from woodland creation revenue budgets would likely put those budgets in an overcommitted position.

On the announced loss of funding from Transport Scotland towards the Strategic Timber Transport Fund, PL noted that it was not planned to make up the difference from SF’s budget, and that alternative options would be presented to Ministers after the exploration of possible mitigation.

AH noted that budget presentations were currently made on the basis of demand, and queried whether a projection based on achieving woodland creation targets would be a useful addition.

PL noted:

1. The need for clarity on expected training costs, so that budgets could be allocated as necessary.

* **Action: SET to engage with RM to discuss and confirm training budget requirements.**

1. The need for clear lines on the use of ringfenced and resource budgets, and how any further budget reductions would impact future woodland creation.

* **Action: RM to provide lines to PL for input at Directorate level**

RM noted that the half-yearly budget review was planned to take place at the next meeting of SET.

**AOB**

RM undertook to circulate updated proposals on accommodation costs for agreement.