**SCOTTISH FORESTRY EXECUTIVE TEAM**

**Minutes (Draft)**

**Wednesday 28th September 2022**

**SET Attendees:**

Dave Signorini (DS)

Zahid Deen (ZD)

Ross MacHardie (RM)

Jonathan Taylor (JT)

Brendan Callaghan (BC)

Alan Hampson (AH)

James Aldred (JA) – minutes

**In Attendance:**

Helen McKay (HM) – for items 6, 7

**Apologies:**

None

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

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

On outstanding actions:

* AP8/Jan 22, Public Register improvements: This was noted as closed as the Public Register improvements were being taken forward as part of the FGS enhancement programme.
* AP4/July 22, Options appraisal for potential new financial system: Noted that the project manager for this project was due to start in post in early October and would take this forward.
* AP5/July 22, Estates management options: On the agenda for this meeting.

1. **Budget and Staffing Update**

RM introduced the report, noting the current financial position and developments to date.

In discussion, an apparent discrepancy was noted between the offered savings for 2022/23 (£4m resource, £1.7m capital) and savings ultimately taken (£5.7m resource).

* **Action:** RM to challenge SG Finance on apparent discrepancy

On woodland creation, BC noted likely underspend against the budget due to continuing staffing capacity issues within the wider forestry sector, and the difficulty of increasing non-woodland options to compensate given long lead times and comparatively small budgets. Communications to stakeholders had been updated to signal schemes remained open for applications.

AH noted the requirement to report back to the Minister on progress on the FGS enhancements, and noted this would likely highlight the ongoing underspend.

On the Scottish Rainforest budget, AH reported that signoff was anticipated on or around 24th October, with the majority of budget expected to go to FLS this year, and a proportion to come to SF next financial year to fund a project officer post. The Minister had queried the potential for a ‘protective bubble’ around the rainforest, with the FGS as a possible delivery mechanism.

On salaries, SET noted the strong spend to date and the risk of potential overspend, particularly given that pay awards were yet to be confirmed. DS noted the need for clearer management information to inform staffing decisions. RM noted that the risk of overspend could be offset through reviewing budget forecasting and challenging spend to identify possible underspend to mitigate.

* **Action:** RM to review vacancy levels and likely end-of-year budget position.

In discussion, SET confirmed the position that recruitments to existing posts and maternity cover could be signed off at team level with notification to RM and MD. SET members were expected to notify SET and MD of any such decisions taken regarding posts at PB3 and above.

**SET approved** the creation of the following posts:

* Landscape and Culture Adviser, Policy and Practice
* Information and Governance Officer, Executive Office
* Operational Delivery Product Manager, Operational Delivery
* Senior Project Manager, Operational Services and Transformation
* Technical Officer (part time 0.6FTE), Perth and Argyll
* Internal Comms Officer, Executive Office
* Woodland Officer, Grampian
* Professional Support to the Chief Forester, Operational Services and Transformation

The post of Regulations Manager, Operational Delivery was not approved, subject to further discussion.

1. **Updates to governance arrangements/meetings**

JT introduced the paper, noting the proposed changes to SET and SAG meetings and the upcoming review of the SF Framework Document.

AH noted outstanding ambiguity as to the appropriate place within the governance structure for policy creation and development, with DS noting that one of the stated purposes of SOG was to pre-empt the detailed discussion of issues and decisions at SET.

* **Action:** AH to set out proposed policy creation and development process in future SET paper.

SET noted a potential issue with increased scrutiny from the wider Scottish Government, particularly around the assurance of woodland creation programmes. BC noted that SOG had agreed to look at the potential for regular presentation of woodland creation summaries by conservancy as a first step to better reporting. AH noted the wider question of SG interaction and implications for the management of resources and prioritisation of increasing demands.

1. **Discussion on approach to SF estate**

SET discussed the paper, noting that the current picture of lease durations meant that decisions may be required while the agreed hybrid working approach was still bedding in. Key needs for SF’s estates were noted as compatibility with the agreed hybrid working approach; increased sustainability; reduced financial footprint; and inclusion of staff preferences.

Regarding responsibility for developing the approach, SET noted the multiple interdependencies involved.

**It was agreed** that:

* Operational Services & Transformation would lead on the project;
* RM would sit on the project board in light of his involvement in drawing up estates business plans across multiple organisations, and would lead on the approach to Silvan House;
* The project would report into the Improvement Programme to allow alignment with the Future Working Project, financial management, and sustainability issues;
* The project would aim to produce specific recommendations on estates strategy for SET approval.
* **Action:** Any key decisions to come to SET for approval en route to Minister where appropriate.

1. **Regional Stakeholder Groups - formal adoption of their Terms of Reference**

SET reviewed the report and approved the Terms of Reference for formal adoption.

1. **Feedback from first Strategic Operations Group**

BD reported on the first meeting of the Group, which was held in person on 22 September at Birnam Arts Centre.

The meeting had reviewed the proposed remit for the group and voiced support for keeping the Group small and inviting outside attendees as needed. **SET agreed** that the Chief Forester be included on the SOG circulation list and given a standing invitation to attend SOG for items of interest.

Progress against woodland creation targets would be taken as a standing item.

The conservators had welcomed the role of the Group in ensuring the conservancies maintained good oversight of emerging policy issues.

The Group had noted the increased number of proposals for woodland creation on higher grade agricultural land, and felt there was a need to either update the existing WEAG guidance or to source a new policy steer. SET noted the apparent mixed messages from the RPID on higher-grade planting, and that the lead role on land use policy would sit with the Land Use Transformation Board.

* **Action:** AH and BC to discuss the position and resolve an approach.

1. **Scottish Forestry Strategy: Progress Report to Parliament**

AH presented the draft Report, noting the intention to present options to the Minister for laying options, communications, etc. alongside the draft Report.

On the report’s content, DS noted that the Minister was likely to wish to cover forestry-related elements of the Programme for Government in her foreword to demonstrate the Government’s forward intentions. HM recommended that the relative importance of the Strategy and Implementation Plan be brought forward within the Report for clarity.

SET discussed the potential to use the Report as the basis for a forestry-themed debate in Parliament, but it was felt that the Implementation Plan might provide a stronger opportunity for discussion.

* **Action**: Alan to put draft Report on agenda for next Ministerial meeting and liaise with Special Advisors; to liaise with NZET Committee Clerk re: parliamentary timetabling.

1. **AOB**

None raised.