Scottish Forestry
Coilltearachd na h-Alba

Executive Board Minutes

Executive Board Meeting held on Tuesday 20 May 2025

Saughton House, E1 Scottish Forestry Large Meeting Room and Microsoft Teams

Draft for approval

Present:
- Paul Lowe, Chief Executive (PL) - Chair
- Brendan Callaghan, Director of Operational Delivery (BC)
- Zahid Deen, Director of Transformation and Corporate Services (ZD)
- Adam Dearnley, Director of Finance (AD)
- Jonathan Taylor Head of Corporate Affairs (JT)
- Jason Hubert, Head of Forest Sector Development (JH)
- Rachel Martin, Interim Head of Corporate Affairs and Communications (RM)

In Attendance:
- Nicola Steven, Learning and Skills Development Manager (NS) – Item 7
- Marelle Dalziel, Senior HR Business Partner (MD) – Item 8
- Bastian Altrock, Future Working & Corporate Sustainability Manager (BA) – Item 9
- Julie McClymont, Executive Office Assistant (JM) - Minutes

Apologies:
- Helen McKay, Chief Forester for Scotland (HM)

1. Welcome and declarations of interest (as relevant)

1.1 The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

1.2 No new declarations of interest were made.

2. Minutes and actions of previous meeting

2.1 The minutes from the previous meeting were approved.

2.2 Actions arising from previous meetings:

The Executive Board noted the updates provided.

- 32/11 MD confirmed action plan was circulated and noted as closed.
- 25/01 BC advised for compensatory planting levels the level of impact would be c.25% in the north. BC informed the EB that the effect of offshore windfarms would be for more infrastructure and there is planned approved work for 3000+ ha of compensatory planting. BC also advised that if we are to provide funding then clients can then seek better offers from electricity

developers. PL commented this could lead to unnecessary work and more discussions are required.
PL/BC agreed this action can be closed and follow up discussion to be set up.

- **Action**: PL/BC to arrange further discussion on compensatory planting levels.

- 25/08 JT confirmed he had written to Kevin McMillian, and this will be picked up through the IPD Board - Closed

3. Standing item: woodland creation update - ALL

3.1 BC informed the Executive Board (EB) that there are 200 claim cases that still require to be inputted. Although BC expressed concern, he confirmed that discussions have taken place with Senior Ops and teams that these will be claimed. BC advised the difficulty in providing the figures now and noted that Ian Cowe and Robert Stagg are working on the data and hoped that the figures would be available by the end of the week.

3.2 JT asked about FLS's woodland creation outturn and PL stated that they were to be on target. PL noted that Cabinet Secretary was aware that we would be under the PfG commitment of 10,000ha and suggested we will need to explain the impacts in the briefing of the budget cuts, loss of investor confidence and increased scrutiny and challenges. BC also pointed out the relevance to feed in on our experience with Stobo and other judicial reviews like Todrig and the additional barriers we have.

3.3 JT referred to the CCC (Climate Change Committee) report and PL confirmed it was due tomorrow.

- **Action**: JT to send EB members a copy of the CCC report.

3.4 BC commented on the recent JHI research which cuts across SG policy on woodland creation. PL asked JT to get Helen McKay and Helen Sellars to prepare advice on the commissioning and developing of environmental research.

- **Action**: JT to ask Helen McKay and Helen Sellars to provide a advice email on the commissioning of environmental research.

- **Action:** JT to arrange a meeting PL/BC with Matt Williams, Chief Scientist.

4. Standing Item: Finance Update

4.1 AD introduced the paper and highlights the forecast underspend of £730K and also the increase in staff costs due to flexi/holiday pay balances. PL acknowledged a good result and emphasized the importance of staying within budget.

4.2 . PL also enquired about the allocations for this year and AD confirmed it will formally be in July. AD informed PL that due to team absence, the coordination with stakeholders on this will now need it to pick up elsewhere within the finance team. PL raised a point regarding resilience and requested insight from AD and Gary Henderson if there would be a need for temporary support.

- **Action** AD/GH to let PL know if temporary support will be required.

5. FGS Payments RPID

5.1 AD introduced the paper and provided an overview and recommendation. AD highlights the challenges of retiring staff at RPID and the gap of loss of knowledge and expertise. RPID has requested that SF assist in the processing of forestry grant payments. AD expressed his concern about the resource if SF are to accept this role. PL asked what level of future resource might be required. AD noted this was to be confirmed but currently there is 1 person with expertise and knowledge in National Office Grants Team and there would be some resource required from AD team. AD also noted that Linsday has requested additional resources.

5.2 BC noted that RPID works in a different way for blocks of payments at a time due to peaks and troughs. Whereas the FGS continue payments and the scheme is open throughout the year. AD noted the new role would not only focus on payments, but it could leverage knowledge of RPID systems to improve payments and strengthen controls around recoveries, which has been noted as needing improvements by the auditors. Additionally, the role would assist in developing requirements and business rules for future grants support in SF. BC commented that it would also be possible to link systems connecting grants, delivery and finance.

5.3 PL interprets this as ‘transfer of work’ and confirmed he is content with the paper’s recommendation and emphasised the importance of monitoring workloads. PL asked AD about the timescales with RPID and AD advised there has been nothing agreed but are prepared to deliver for this year.

5.4 ZD reflected on the new £90+M SG contract for agriculture/rural digital/IT and how SF will interact long term with RPID. ZD commented that the interim changes like this one will need to be addressed but ARP tends to push back and disconnect with money being used. PL suggested that we pick strategic conversations and candidate topics.

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5.5 PL noted agreement for EB to sign off the paper and to progress engagement with the Head of RPID. He noted the need to reflect this change on SF's strategic risk register.

5.6 BC raised a point on Data Protection and AD to link in with Louise MacLean (LM)

- **Action:** AD to discuss with LM the implications of SLA advice on Data Protection and when we can implement it.

- **Action**: JT to also engage with Marliese Richmond (MR) on updating the SRR with a payment agency transition risk.

6. AI Opportunities, Copilot Chat and M365 Copilot Enterprise.

6.1 ZD introduced the paper and outlines the opportunities and benefits AI can bring to SF and asks the group for their thoughts on the potential use of AI via Copilot Chat which is free to us and Enterprise that can only be granted with a license at an additional cost. ZD advised EB that SG had oversubscribed, and we cannot buy a license.

- **Action:** ZD to draft a note to PL on pushing back to ITEC for licenses.

6.2 ZD requested that EB members to provide volunteers/champions from each area to pilot the use of the AI tools and feedback. ZD then referred to Annex 2 in the paper that consisted of a table outlining cases and prompts with examples and highlighted an example relevant for use in the Corporate Affairs Team with regards to minutes and how AI could help with preparing transcript, formatting etc. PL mentioned he was impressed with an AI tool that prepared minutes from a recent meeting he was at and reiterated it is a useful piece of technology to have in the organization and make us work more effectively. ZD comments on the impact of freeing up time in administrative work.

6.3 RM noted her support for pushback to get the licenses

6.4 JH raised points on limits of material being uploaded and sensitive data. ZD advised that it is unknown at this point and will look get answers to that. PL commented the SF will take a thoughtful approach to this. ZD informed EB that they just need to identify people who would like to learn and start the journey of AI and support will be provided by Digital Business Support Team. Steven Dent will then come out to departments with cases that we can explore with AI.

- **Action:** EB members to consider nominating volunteers from their area to pilot AI tools.

7. Learning and Skills Development Strategy

7.1 NS presented the 2025–2027 Learning and Skills Development Strategy for Executive Team approval. This builds on the previous strategy and reflects how L&SD is evolving and provides a basis for the Agency to provide a structured, consistent, and robust methodology to L&SD for all staff in line with the Corporate Strategy and Plan.

7.2 BC raised concerns on gaps especially within in this area and asked on how development and upskilling are quantified. NS confirmed that there is 12 section plans being discussed with Doug next week and NS team will support and link into teams' plans. NS also confirmed that there will be workshops being held in the summer to identify learning needs within the teams.

7.3 MD also highlighted leadership and management, and they are supporting managers with coaching and mentoring. PL supported this balanced approach.

7.4 In response to PL's enquiry on a timeline, NS informed the EB that they are working on a diagnostic maturity statement and will get a tailored solution plan. This will start in May, provide communications in June to roll out diagnostics in summer with an aim to plan gaps and solutions by the end of the year.

7.5 There were discussions around the table with regards to communications and making staff aware. MD highlighted pathways, soundposts, and development courses. MD also suggested monthly themes; PL indicated that Risk Management should be at the top. MD agreed.

- **Action:** RM and NS to link in and feedback on communications for staff

7.6 EB thanked NS for her hard work in pulling it together Overall the EB were pleased with the new strategy which covers the challenges of supporting more skills-based learning as well as leadership and management development

- **Action:** NS to provide an update to PL on leadership development.

- **Action:** NS to come back to EB twice a year for L&SD updates.

8. People Survey Update on Actions

8.1 MD provided an update on the six key areas which were: purpose of Scottish Forestry; change management; learning and skills development; better systems and processes; pay and benefits; and wellbeing. MD highlighted significant progress has been made.

8.2 MD confirmed:

- corporate strategy had been presented to staff on 29th April 2025 by introducing

  the Agency's vision, mission, purpose and objectives
- workshops will be held with SF on 24 June 2025.
- The PMO introduced a new change management methodology.
- Continuous development in delivery systems and process improvements
- The reduction of working hours to 35 hours a week has been positive.
- NS has made good progress on Learning and Development
- Jill Palmer's role in taking shape and we are in a good position for Wellbeing

8.3 BC noted that a paper is also being presented to SOG with regard to operating office hours for practical adjustment.

8.4 PL noted that the next People Survey will be in September and asked if this could be brought back to the EB for the August meeting. MD also informed the EB that the planning of the launch is underway, and the approach is under review as a common theme of feedback is that the people survey happens to often.

- **Action** RM/MD People Survey to be brought back to August EB

8.5 RM raised a point about change management and asked if there was guidance on how the PMO was going to roll this out. MD advised she will find out and revert.

8.6 ZD pointed out to the EB that SF did not have a Wellbeing Lead, PL nominated MD for the role. MD was happy to pick this up and EB in full agreement.

- **Action**: RM to do comms out staff to advising MD as the lead for wellbeing in SF

9. Net Zero Road Map

9.1 BA shared a paper on new Net Zero Road Map/ Strategy, which laid out the path for the agency to meet its Net Zero commitments. BA commented on the road map principles, vision, the target and links to available data and covering risks and governance as well as key milestones. BA noted the organization wants to be an exemplar of public sector low carbon operations and it links to the strategic objectives and corporate plan.

9.2 PL commented on assumptions that are relying on technology improvements and how SF cast their ambition and the need to have flexibility to re-evaluate.

9.3 PL agreed to launch, and a further discussion led to the EB being content having the strategy against the action plan. BA also informed the EB that the intensity matrix can link into the plans.

9.4 The EB confirmed to BA that they agreed on points 1, 2 and 3. PL then referred to point 4 the identification of a SET member. PL required further clarification on is expected on the role of the SET member. It was agreed that BA would come back to them on this. ZD noted he will continue to support BA in the interim.

- **Action:** BA to provide further clarification of the need of a EB member.

10 AOB

The EB thanked RM for her support in covering the Head of Corporate Affairs

Meeting closed.

Next meeting
Wednesday 2 July 2025 10:00, Saughton House E1 Spur Large meeting room & Microsoft Teams.