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| SF_col_landscape_logo | Strategic Advisory Group |

MINUTES of SCOTTISH FORESTRY STRATEGIC ADVISORY GROUP

1. 29 March 2023

**Silvan House, Edinburgh**

**Present:**

Dave Signorini (Scottish Forestry Chief Executive)

Alan Hampson (Head of Policy and Practice)

Jonathan Taylor (Head of Scottish Forestry Executive Office)

Brendan Callaghan (Head of Operational Delivery)

Zahid Deen (Head of Operational Services and Transformation)

Helen McKay (Chief Forester for Scotland)

Marliese Richmond (Corporate Planning and Governance Manager) – Agenda Item 3

Eleanor Ryan (Non-Executive Advisor)

Phil Taylor (Non-Executive Advisor)

**Apologies:**

Ross Machardie (Head of Finance and Business Support)

James Stuart (Non-Executive Committee member)

Richard Morris (Non-Executive Committee member)

**Outstanding actions**

| **Ref** | **Action** | **SAG Lead/**  **Staff Member** | **Target Date** | **Status** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| AP5/June 22 | BC to collate information and provide analysis on the scoring of FGS applications. | BC | June 2023 | Outstanding |
| AP12/Dec 22 | MD to look at more detailed feedback in staff survey in respect of caring responsibilities (managers support for carers) and if possible, breakdown by location/cost centre.  Update: It has not been possible to obtain more detailed analysis in this area, as a limited number of people responded there were too few to allow for comments to understand the markings or to be identified to any cost centres. Happy to discuss approach and views ahead of next staff survey. | MD / JT | Next SAG | Outstanding |
| AP13/Mar23 | AH, ZD, BC will work with MR to clarify what should be articulated in the corporate plan and produce a draft plan for the end of May. | AH, ZD, BC and MR | May 2023 | Completed |

1. **Welcome from Dave Signorini, Scottish Forestry CEO**

* Dave welcomed everyone to the meeting.
* The minutes from the 14th December 2022 meeting were agreed.
* Action AP11/Sept 22 was marked as complete.
* There were no declarations of interest.
* There were no matters arising.

1. **Update current issues – Budget, Edinburgh Office Relocation and Future Working**

**Budget:** Outturn for 2022/23 is approximately £71m. There was an underspend of £19.1m in woodland grants for 2022/23. The budget for 2023/24 is £102.4m. This is an increase on 2022/23, including an increase for woodland grants and non-woodland grants.

Transition costs for the Edinburgh Office move; the new finance, HR and Learning and Development systems are not as expensive to procure and implement as previously anticipated. For 2023/24, a pay settlement increase of 5% has been forecast.

**Edinburgh Officer Relocation:** Dave updated on the upcoming move from Silvan House, to Saughton House, Edinburgh. There was a formal appraisal process, and the final decision considered staff needs and staff were engaged. Workshops were held to determine staff views. Of the spaces considered, Saughton House met our priorities (Meadowbank House was second). Jonathan is leading a small team, working with Scottish Government space planners to ensure that the space meets the needs of SF staff, negotiate the MOTO and to undertaken the decommissioning requirements of Silvan House.

**Future working:** SF wanted to trial the activity based working model in all seasons and it will be reviewed in August-23. An equality impact assessment has been conducted and is under constant review. Occupancy checks and ongoing workshops to collect feedback on adoption, impact and necessary adaptations have been conducted. will be provided to the Senior Executive Team to allow them to make a decision on SF’s working model in the longer term.

**Wider estate strategy:** The Estate Strategy outline has been agreed by programme board. The next draft will be taken to the Senior Operations Group for final comments.

1. **Feedback on staff engagement with developing the new Corporate Plan**

Marliese Richmond (MR), the Corporate Planning and Governance Manager, presented the learning and findings of the corporate planning workshops that were run for staff between November 2022 and March 2023. To date, 130 staff have participated, with a further in person workshop for operational delivery planning, and a mop up online session.  **The presentation can be viewed** [here](https://prezi.com/view/DrLRshI4MapseIppCarf/).

The Strategic Advisory Group members thanked Marliese for a very comprehensive presentation and thoroughness of the engagement workshops; they gave the following feedback:

* **Staff Engagement:** This was a useful exercise to have conducted, and will have helped staff understand and feel part of the corporate planning process.
* **Target Operating Model:** The feedback from teams supports the need for the Target Operating Model (TOM) being developed by the PMO, and will assist in prioritising next steps. It has highlighted the importance of communicating it to staff, staggering change and allowing a period of consolidation for staff.
* **IT Systems:** Collaboration has been and will continue to be part of the service redesign of our IT systems. This process has shown that staff have clear ideas of how procedures could improve and where possible, this should be enabled.
* **Strategic Objectives:** Agreed the broad need and scope of the objectives. But that strategic objective 1 (Public Policy) should not necessarily be the leading objective (or be reworded around our support to Minister’s objectives), as the Scottish Ministers will be the key audience, this needs to be the lead objective. However, we can undertake some activities to unpack this for staff.
* **Different Type of Corporate Plan:** There was consensus that this is a different type of plan to the first one, which was more about establishing SF as an agency, agreeing our purpose, and finding our identity. This corporate plan is much more about the next steps, the direction of travel over the next few years, delivering on our targets, developing our staff, and building on our values. The themes raised by staff resonated with SAG members, and reflected the discussions at SAG.
* **A Lean Corporate Plan:** The plan should be kept short and succinct – the detail should be translated in plans elsewhere (eg business plans). Suggest format similar to [Nature Scot Corporate Plan – 2018-22](https://www.nature.scot/sites/default/files/2018-08/Publication%202018%20-%20Corporate%20Plan%202018-22.pdf).
* **Business As Usual:** It was agreed that business as usual (BAU) must be present in corporate plan – and that there were two levels in operation – BAU and the improvements suggested by staff/planned as part of TOM. It cannot solely be about the targets –staff must see their work reflected. Seeing the value of moving forward must be captured.
* **Consultation**: Recognise the plan has to have public consultation, but this can be at appropriately pitched and not necessarily require significant programme of engagement. Consider linkages to other key issues e.g. FGS consultation to ensure the plan isn’t out of step.

The next steps were outlined and actions agreed:

* **Strategic Objective 1 Policy** - AH will work with MR to work on the outcome around public policy, and adding value to delivery.
* **Strategic Objective 3 Processes** – MR will continue to work with the Head of Programme Management Office on prioritisation of TOM activities. MR will work with BC and ZD to clarify what should be articulated in the Corporate Plan.

**Action: Draft and Consult** – MR to pull draft together, referring to the staff consultation, as well as recent stakeholder consultation already undertaken on Scotland’s Forestry Strategy Implementation Plan and the Forestry Grant Scheme. Share draft with Minister and plan public consultation activities.

1. **Meeting our Woodland Creation Targets:** Discussion on the issues and challenges

The paper informed the SAG about meeting the 2022/23 woodland creation out turn and progress towards future targets.

2021 was an exceptional year due to the impacts of Storm Arwen, with significant diversion of resources to the clean-up and felling activities, resulting in difficulties in securing labour. Our expectation is that slippage this year will be the same or more.

The provisional forecast for woodland creation for 2022-23 is in the range 9,800 – 10,800 hectares. We expect to meet the 4,000 hectare new native woodland target contained within the Bute House Agreement and work is under way to develop proposals focussed on overcoming forestry sector capacity and skills challenges.

There continues to be healthy pipeline of Forestry Grant Scheme (FGS) applications for woodland creation, with over 20,000 hectares of projects currently being worked on by applicants and SF. Although 12,800 hectares of applications were submitted for planting in 2022-23, some applications required further development, and the assessment process was not completed in time for planting in 2022-23. These applications will mainly be delivered in 2023-24.

The main constraint limiting delivery of the woodland creation target in 2022 was a skills shortage and of experienced professional foresters to work with landowners to design high-quality proposals to meet the required standards for FGS funding. The preparation of woodland creation proposals requires a range of specialist knowledge covering soils, forestry practice, landscape design, mapping, environmental surveys, and environmental impact assessment. Significant numbers of experienced foresters have been retiring from the sector in recent years and although there has been recruitment in both the private and public sector, it has led to a situation where there isn’t yet sufficient capacity to increase the rate at which forestry projects are being developed, assessed and delivered.

Discussions with industry representatives, suggest that they have a similar view that the growth in planting is being constrained by aspects of forestry sector capacity rather than the performance of public agencies or the complexities of woodland creation approval processes. At a UK level, we expect that Scotland will be creating around 70-75% of all new woodland.

Increasing numbers of cases are proving to be problematic as a result of intense stakeholder interest. This involves more staff and agent time to deal with and reduces output. Assessing issues and ensuring compliance is time consuming. There would need to be changes in the legal basis to simplify the process. There was a suggestion that SF could offer formal training or workshops to the private sector to assist with the preparation of FGS applications. SF have done this in the past and it is considered necessary again, but it would impact on SF capacity.

There was discussion around the need to change our approach to training and supporting recently appointed Woodland Officer staff. To address this, we would need to provide an increased level of training on key aspects of the role together with ongoing support visits to conservancies to help consolidate learning, and ensure that good practice is getting embedded. There was discussion about the curriculum of formal forestry courses and the need to ensure that they meet the needs of the duties of todays’ Woodland Officer, including the grants process.

Quantifiable benefits of the Improvement and Delivery Programme on the current system, and the scope for digitisation and automation should start to be realised from 23/24. Developing our training provision is key to improving performance, but that requires taking experienced staff away from casework. We need to increase our capacity to train staff and provide support in other ways, such as technical support visits. To do this will require 2-3 FTE (from across the national ops delivery team) to be dedicated to training and supporting staff. It was suggested that SF could explore using retired staff from the sector to help facilitate the learning.

1. **AOB**

None.

1. **Date of Next Meeting**

The next SAG is 13 June 2023. Suggestion that this is at a different location and has an element of a visit, possibly to discuss some land use issues and see forest operations. Location to be confirmed.