

**MINUTES OF THE 39<sup>TH</sup> MEETING OF THE FORESTRY COMMISSION  
ENGLAND STAFF COUNCIL – HELD ON 8 JUNE 2005 AT NATIONAL  
OFFICE, CAMBRIDGE**

Present

Official Side: Richard Britton, Chairman  
John Scotney  
Ian Lamb

Trade Union Side: Mick Hoban, Vice Chairman  
Josie Wragg, PCS  
Maria Henderson, PCS  
Stuart Grainger, PCS  
Dick Gossling, PCS  
John Winterbourne, PCS  
Ed Shephard, FC TU Secretary

1. INTRODUCTION AND APOLOGIES

Richard Britton opened proceedings and tendered the apologies of Crispin Thorn and Ron Melville from the TU side, alongside welcoming Ed Shephard to the meeting.

2. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

These were agreed as a true record.

3. MATTERS ARISING

a. Citizens Charter – WGS Mark III and EWGS

John Scotney confirmed that these targets will continue to be suspended through to 1 April 2006, there being little point in setting unreasonable targets with new computer and grants systems coming in. Mick Hoban welcomed the clarification and said that staff would be pleased with it.

b. FWPS Assimilation – Project Plan Programme and Project Manager

Richard Britton advised that he had written to the TU Side in April setting out the position as it stood then. The present position was that Bill Heslegrave was now spending more time on the establishment of the Project Board for the work, which was to comprise of the 4 organisations involved, namely the FC, Rural Development Service (RDS), Rural Payments Agency (RPA) and Defra. A couple of meetings had been held in the past month or so with the primary purpose of beginning to gather together the necessary staff to take the Project forward. He added that Defra were keen on setting things on a 'Project Plan' basis and that this will move forward with an unchanged timetable and target date of 1 April 2006. The Paying Agency situation had not yet been resolved but the EC had a strong preference for there only being

one such Agency. This was more likely to be the RPA, from 2007 onwards, but with the FC suitably linked-in.

Continuing, Richard stated that there remained some big issues for other organisations within the Group to resolve – the RPA especially, on mapping issues. He said that if these teething troubles for the RPA and RDS could not be sorted out then there might yet be doubt over the scheduled takeover date.

In reply, Mick Hoban said that questions still remained, at local level, particularly over the uncertainty of information coming through. Richard Britton stated that a little further information would come out from the upcoming round of EWGS seminars and more is likely to come through later in the year, at the WIG/WMG Seminars, when more ought to be known.

Mick Hoban said that he looked forward to receiving progress information from Bill Heslegrave which will give more of the picture to staff. Richard Britton advised that this was likely to occur around mid July. Stuart Grainger stated that it was important that a representative sample of Commission AOs and WOs should visit the RDS and be updated on the details of processing etc. Mick Hoban added that any arrangements in this regard would not be helped by the RDS beginning to break up some of their teams.

Richard Britton advised that data, due to be received from RDS, needed to be 'sample checked', initially to ensure that it was "clean" and usable before the FC would agree to take the whole batch on. This would form part of the Project Plan exercise. He added that he was confident that the 'contacts' in the other organisations would satisfactorily address matters for the Commission.

c. Grant Management Procedures

John Scotney hoped that the "thank you" message to all staff, from Paul Hill-Tout, at the (financial) year end had rounded matters off. In response, Mick Hoban confirmed that this had met concerns and been timely and well received.

d. Great Eastern House – Accommodation Difficulties

In answer to a Staff Side update request, John Scotney advised that the lessors Planning Permission 'process' had seemed to have stalled at present. There had been no formal notices posted in either the local press nor on lampposts in the vicinity of the office. The FC was keeping close tabs on the situation, via Land Agent, Charles Ashley. Before making any further internal moves within the office, Management Side wished to be sure of what may be planned in the relatively near future. It remained possible that Ashwells (the Property Developer lessors) could bring their plans forward at any time and that, rather than pay the Commission compensation for early closure on the lease, they could move the FC to other accommodation they own in the Cambridge area.

e. Move from Operational to Non-Operational Working for PB4s

In opening this item, John Scotney said that he had not, as yet, received much information from Conservancies to suggest that there had been any particular ramifications following this change. He added that the most notable example had, in fact, emanated from the Vice Chairman's own Conservancy, Yorkshire and The Humber. Responding, Mick Hoban said that the Staff Side had been coming at the matter from a view of how the various Conservancies were approaching and managing the situation. Feedback on the subject would be appreciated as the Staff Side would be concerned about different interpretations and approaches being applied. He added that, under the revised Staff Council set-ups, the Trade Unions would also be looking at the consistency of approach from both the FE and FC sides.

John Scotney suggested that a review of the changed scenario be conducted after it had been in operation for a year. This was accepted as an appropriate way to deal with the matter.

**Action: Official Side**

f. Time Recording System

Richard Britton advised that, due to a number of other, higher priority, concerns, John Scotney had been unable to take this matter forward, but he would tackle it when able to. Mick Hoban stated that staff continue to be frustrated with the system but are learning to live with it. Stuart Grainger added that, at the recent EOs meeting, one Conservancy had offered-up a 'Simplified Guide' to accessing the system for wider use. This locally produced guidance was now being spread to all Conservancies for potential use and was worth following through.

**Action: John Scotney**

g. Modernising Rural Delivery (MRD) – Cultural Audit of FC

In reply to the Staff Side's outstanding query from the last meeting, Richard Britton confirmed that quite a high percentage of FC staff had been used in the Consultants' sampling exercise. John Scotney continued by advising that a presentation on the final report had recently been given to senior staff. Many positive points had arisen together with a few good suggestions for areas where improvements could be made. Mick Hoban noted, with interest, that Joe Watts' minute suggested he would be giving further MRD updates in the future.

4. EWGS/GLADE UPDATE

This item was introduced by Mick Hoban, who said that there was no specific issue to table but the Staff Side were seeking to catch-up on and gain an assessment of the issues as they were seen to stand at present. In response, Richard Britton distributed 2 papers to all attendees in order to provide further

information on the subjects. The first was entitled 'English Woodland Grant Scheme Full Briefing Note' and was due to be issued at the England National Committee the next day. It would also be passed to Forest Enterprise England for awareness and circulation. Richard Britton said that the Note gave a "flavour" of the message being put out to the Trade etc and was now 'live' and not embargoed.

Mick Hoban commented that such a Note had been long sought and was now welcomed. John Scotney advised that there had recently been a big push in getting information out to Conservancies and enquired whether this had been noticed and accepted locally. Dick Gossling confirmed that it had and stated that the 'step change' point had come with the recent publication of EWGS pack documentation.

In the matter of GLADE, Richard Britton said that this had come a long way in recent months and that this new system, underpinning the EWGS, would be available in July. Initially, however, this would only be for a limited Pilot Group of e-business users and volunteers would be sought during the upcoming series of seminars. He referred to the second paper which he had issued to the meeting, which was entitled 'GLADE Project Weekly Report – 02/06/05'. This was a relatively new introduction which updated progress on a weekly basis. He continued by giving background information on selected items from the document.

John Scotney added that there would not be a 'big bang' introduction of the system in July. It would be rolled-out gradually and he wondered whether staff had understood this. Mick Hoban replied that staff were beginning to do so and that a greater understanding would likely come through after the forthcoming seminars. He added that an element of stress remained but the documents which had just been issued would now give more reassurance and staff would be appreciative of it.

Richard Britton continued by showing the meeting an example of the East England Grant Prospectus paper for 2005. He explained different aspects of same and said that it would be issued at the Conservancy's Seminar at the end of the week but predominantly be available via the Internet site. All Conservancies would be issuing a paper along similar lines.

## 5. FUTURE ORGANISATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

Mick Hoban said that transitional changes were underway and that there had been good discussions on same at the Staff Side's morning meeting. There had been engagement with Paul Hill-Tout, at a meeting in Nottingham, on 20 April, for which the Trade Union Side had been copied-in on all papers. The TU Side had agreed to Phase 1 of the proposals at that meeting and now wished to know firstly, how matters were progressing and, secondly, the forthcoming arrangements for Trawls and Competitions etc.

In reply, Richard Britton advised that the Executive Board, National Committee and Chairman had all been involved in the deliberations, as well as the DG and Director HR. The current problem with unfilled Senior Posts needed to be approached carefully and had proved difficult. John Scotney confirmed that the process had been delayed on a number of counts and that Paul Hill-Tout was very frustrated with this.

Mick Hoban wished to record Staff Side's concerns with the delay, especially given their urgent agreement to the process in April. John Scotney advised that only one post had thus far moved forward – that of the FE Chief Executive – the adverts for which were appearing in newspapers in the current week. The 2 remaining senior posts would be covered as soon as possible, but there had been problems in getting the Job Specifications absolutely right.

## 6. FUTURE STAFF COUNCIL ARRANGEMENTS

Mick Hoban introduced this item and said that there was a need to await the outcome of next week's special Working Group meeting before being able to take this matter further. The Working Group, which was being convened for the purpose of agreeing outline arrangements for future meetings, would urgently need to be in possession of the minutes from the Nottingham meeting before next Wednesday. If the full version were not available then the relevant part of same would suffice.

**Action: Ian Lamb**

## 7. STAFFING ISSUES

### a. TRAs

Mick Hoban acknowledged that Management Side were trying to work within the TRA guidelines but requested a position statement concerning the longer-term arrangements and what plans there were to resolve the situations. Richard Britton replied by advising that most of the longer-term TRAs were wrapped-up in the outcome of the Phase 1 organisational change. The vacant Head of Programmes was having a particular knock-on effect to the Programme Managers. Mick Hoban said that the TU side continued to be concerned with the long-standing TRAs but accepted that the 6 months' criteria duration was proving difficult to meet at present.

Ed Shephard advised that a similar situation applied in other areas of the FC and that there seemed to be a continual drift beyond the 6 months' criteria.

John Scotney added that problems had arisen with some TRAs whereby the last salary increases had negatively affected some staff's allowance. He said he would welcome TU Side involvement to try and progress the issue. Ed Shephard requested details in order that he could look into the matter.

**Action: Ian Lamb**

b. Staff in Post by Conservancy

Mick Hoban stated that the listing was of limited use in its current format. Dick Gossling added that it needed to have a "Comparison to Business Plan Numbers" slant, where the revised style would simply confirm any differences against the approved BP figures for each grade within each Conservancy. This request was agreed.

**Action: Ian Lamb**

c. National Office Staff Chart

The chart was reviewed and Dick Gossling commented that there was a strong need for the 'Senior Information Officer' vacancy to be filled as soon as possible. Ian Lamb advised that Mark Pritchard was presently working on this with a view to securing early action in the matter. In reply to a further query concerning the grading of the Rural Development and Sustainable Forestry Programme Manager posts, Ian Lamb confirmed that these were both at PB2 level.

d. South West England PB5 (Ops) Staffing and Recruitment

In introducing this item, Dick Gossling referred to the recent transfer, to Perth Conservancy, of a PB5 (Ops) and wished to record that action be taken to ensure that the post was not left vacant for too long, possibly allowing pressures to build up. Richard Britton replied that Local Management would have the matter in hand with a view to covering the situation, as seen appropriate, at the earliest juncture.

8. ENERGY CROPS

Dick Gossling opened discussions by stating that there appeared to be an unknown workload complication coming up which needed drawing to Management Side's attention. He further queried whether they had any knowledge of the level of Energy Crops work potentially coming up and whether there was a need for co-ordination on how applications were dealt with around the country. He considered that there may be differences in the way Conservancies were handling things.

In reply, Richard Britton noted Staff Side's points but said he was not aware of any concerns, nationally, about differences in the handling of applications. He added that the matter would need to be brought up via an Operations Managers' meeting and elected to take the point forward to the next gathering.

**Action: Richard Britton**

With regard to the potential future numbers of applications, Richard Britton stated that some concerns had been raised within East Midlands and Yorkshire & The Humber Conservancies regarding Defra apparently looking for a certain speed of processing. In terms of any 'sea change' in numbers, however, he said that

Management Side's view would be to encourage managers to flag this up. They would be prepared to put additional resources in to help meet that demand. So far as any training requirements were concerned, in terms of the handling procedures etc for applications, this would again need to be aired through an Operations Managers' meeting.

#### 9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

This would need to be informed by developments from next week's Working Group meeting.

**Action: To be advised**