

**Forest Research Staff Council Meeting  
held by video conference on 7 December 2009  
14.00 between NRS and AH**

**Present:**

**Local Management**

Dr J Pendlebury (JP) *Chairman*  
Mr K Charles (KC)  
Dr H Williams (HW)  
Mrs C Holmes (CH) *Secretary*

**Trade Union**

Miss L Adams (LA)  
Mr N Fielding (NF)  
Mr G Brearley (GB)  
Mr M Perks (MP)

**Agenda Item 1 – Apologies**

1. Apologies had been received from J Webber, M Oram, D Watterson and C Quine

**Agenda Item 2 – Minutes and matters arising**

2. It was agreed that the minutes were a fair and accurate record of the previous meeting.

*Action points.*

3. Para 2 - Permanent minute taker – Claire Holmes would take over this role.
4. Para 3 - *Workload survey* – JP invited LA to comment. There is still concern in this respect but this will be looked at again in conjunction with the staff survey results which are due to be presented at the FCEB in December. **Action: LA**
5. Para 4 – *FR Promotion procedures* – LA noted this would be dealt with under agenda item 9. KC confirmed that job specification for each grade had been circulated to staff at the time of the promotion procedures and were now on the FR intranet. **Discharged**
6. Para 8 – *IFOS*. FR has secured a SLA with IFOS for a large amount of work. JP is aware of ongoing tensions around field survey work and will raise further issues at the FC EB on 10th December. The IFOS Board had met and it was expected that future survey work will be put out to competitive tender which FR TSU would have to bid for. JP invited comments. NF suggested comments were left until the Board decision had been finalised. The issue of calculating overhead costs had been raised in staff meetings and JP confirmed there was ongoing discussion with the department over this. It is unrealistic for

our costs to be too expensive as a service provider and we need to ensure that there is a level playing field with regard to costs/overheads etc. Discussion, to include the issue of pricing, will involve PAG related work, IFOS SLAs, country agreements with Wales, England and Scotland and this will be negotiated as part of the overall framework agreement by March if possible. LA questioned what work would have been done by FR before the IFOS unit set up? Historically inventory work was part of FR. NF confirmed that whilst there is a new type of field survey TSU have always made point of increasing the skills base as required. JP confirmed that areas of concern had been raised at last year's Staff Council meeting which have not been addressed. It was agreed that JP and LA would discuss this and the concerns could be taken to the Departmental Committee.

**Action JP/LA**

7. Para 9. *Efficiency and Delivery Review*. Recommendations of the efficiency and delivery review had been circulated to all staff. The key recommendations which have not been addressed were market testing of the laboratory services and working through VME charges. Market testing of the laboratories was not a priority at this time as they are operating well and are commercially competitive. However, whilst it is believed that savings could be made on VME, these can only be realised when each vehicle comes to the end of its contract and FR has the right to renew or discontinue the contract arrangement.
8. Para 10. *Restructuring*. JP noted that the unions had been involved with the process and had given great support. Actions have been dealt with and discharged. LA confirmed that there was no further comments to make. Two members of staff had disagreed with their allocation to Centre, but following discussion these had been resolved.  
**Discharged**
9. Para 16. *Change*. A number of meetings of focus groups, facilitated by Change Navigators, had taken place. It was agreed that LA look at the results of the cultural web analysis which might provide interesting dialogue.  
**Action: LA**

### **Agenda Item 3 – Chief Executive's Report**

10. JP highlighted various aspects of his report. JP noted that any savings made as a result of the restructuring and voluntary severance scheme (c. £½ million) have now been cancelled out by the recent pay increases. He reiterated that during the restructuring he had been grateful for support from TUS and noted the increased workload for KC and his team.

11. FR at present is still running with higher staff numbers than specified in the Corporate Plan which indicated staff numbers should be 230 by the end of the year. The main reason for this discrepancy is that due to various constraints only 15 rather than the anticipated 25 staff were 'lost' through the Voluntary Early Retirement (VER) scheme. FR still has staff with skills which need updating to meet future demands.
12. Three members of staff had achieved promotion. Professor Peter Freer-Smith has been appointed as the FC's first Chief Scientist.
13. Further to the Change Navigators' workshop, which was attended by all Programme Group Leaders, it was acknowledged and highlighted that change was needed to realise our vision of being a robust, market relevant and flexible organisation with a reputation for innovative, applied science. The cultural webs resulting from the discussions had been shared with staff. FREB has issued clear statements with minutes and short summaries circulated to staff promptly following meetings. JP confirmed that in addition to recent investment in the infrastructure (new roof on Alice Holt Science block), funding for the installation of a Solar Photovoltaic System at Alice Holt had also been granted by DECC - the timescale is tight as funding has to be taken by February.
14. JP invited any comments but there were none at this stage.

#### **Agenda Item 4 – Recent management style**

15. LA reported recent concern about management style used in communication with staff regarding TRS inputting. LA suggested working together to circulate a collective message to encourage compliance with these necessary systems. LA and HW had met to discuss the possibility of rolling TRS over later in the week. Carole Martin had been away and this question was yet to be resolved – HW to confirm in due course. **Action: HW**  
HW had various discussions with COA on why we are unable to send out invoices. It was apparent that the version of TRS that we have been working with is less reliable than a later version. The reality is that now the last 6 weeks of TRS have rolled over and reports can be produced. It was pointed out that if staff didn't fill in TRS data then FR is unable to invoice clients and this loss of income quickly mounts up if several staff don't comply over even relatively short periods. It was noted that whilst staff had been asked politely for a number of weeks to fill in TRS data other reasonable systems had now been put in place to ensure compliance. JP noted that TSU had an exemplary record filling in the TRS data. NF suggested that these staff have always been required to fill in timesheets and know the value of this process. He felt that management needed to explain in more depth

to staff the necessity of the systems used. GB questioned whether the TRS pop ups had been successful – the response was ‘yes’. MP agreed that a joint written statement between management and the unions supporting the business needs would be worthwhile. JP to draft core words around a statement for LA to make comment.

**Action: HW/JP/LA**

16. Security training – reaction to the notification of this requirement was more positive and there are only 7 members of staff who have not completed the online training. This is a good indication to the FC EB that FR take initiatives such as this seriously and is willing to play its part. A note of thanks will be sent out to staff following FREB.

**Action: JP**

17. FJPs – JP noted it was unacceptable to not complete the FJP process – a number are still outstanding. Centre Heads will be required to set tight deadlines for any managers who have not taken steps to process their staff’s FJPs – management may come back to the unions if some are not completed to issue a joint statement.

**Action: HW**

18. GB noted that staff should be aware that they have every right to ask their line manager to ensure that PMS requirements are complied with. TUS would discuss further after the meeting and could offer help and advice if required.

19. FREB agenda items. LA questioned when the results would be available from the staff survey. JP confirmed that he believed the results were due to be discussed at the next FC EB, so details would be issued in January.

### **Agenda Item 5 – Business Planning**

20. MP highlighted the various points for discussion. JP confirmed that business plans were being updated and further work would be done in this respect. The spreadsheets should be filled in by the scientists involved to improve accuracy. The importance of having accurate data is clear when applications for new staff are being considered. JP confirmed this would be discussed at the next FREB and reiterated that lessons have been learnt and there would be a fully functioning business plan for next year’s planning. MP felt this was a positive message.

21. JP noted that each of the three Centres are now set up with job numbers, work packages, work areas, projects and programmes. From these agency-wide systems, with a reduction in the number of job codes to a manageable level and the ability to make adjustments, we will be able to get budget information which link to the PAGs.

Discussions with CFS have taken place and an improved system should be in place for next year. MP noted the historical problem of job codes not existing. JP recognised this issue and noted that once the system is up and running information will be available. Training on how to use the systems will be provided for staff where necessary. Additional information – for example, guidance on how to book work from TSU, will be within the Business Plans. JP welcomed the various queries on how the system would work – it was helpful to know the improvements that were required. NF highlighted the necessity of being able to update plans within the year. JP suggested maybe a periodic time where they can be updated could be achievable.

22. There was no information to report on the financial reports – once the figures are available staff will be informed.
23. Regarding the cascade of information available, JP confirmed that when systems are in place guidance will be circulated. MP noted that clear statements would be appreciated on our finances and a structured manual on how it will operate would be useful. HW noted that training on eFin would be available as required.
24. Discussion took place regarding predicted staff numbers. FR external income this financial year looks like it may exceed our £2.4M target and whilst we have taken on a number of short term casuals and FTAs, we still have a number of core permanent staff not fully allocated to external income. LA asked if there was a plan of what skills were going to be needed. Nimisha Limbachia, our HR Sandwich Student, would be looking at the staff survey of competencies, the results of which would be taken forward along with the science strategy in order to highlight any skills shortfall. Communication with unions will be part of this process. LA asked if staff numbers would need to be reduced to 230? JP replied that ideally FR would always bring in enough income to cover the staff numbers we had at any one time. JP confirmed that a lot had been done to generate income but also support was required from Centres on reducing fixed costs (e.g VME) and ensuring the skills of staff within Centres are being fully allocated. KC confirmed that there are 14 short term contract staff and 3 sandwich students. It was noted that CFS funding is continually reducing – LA questioned how this imbalance is ever going to change? Pressure to reduce the transaction activity reducing the number of PAGs to match the programme groups and being consistent in the development of PAG proposals should improve the situation. LA enquired whether individuals with unallocated days could do the work of a lower payband. KC confirmed that this could be an option where essential work is needed to be carried out. JP confirmed that this would be discussed at FREB, and would take options suggested forward. **Action: JP**

## **Agenda Item 6 – Annual Leave**

25. LA requested clarification of how FR is planning to implement the changes in the recent Staff Notice to the banking entitlements of annual leave when some members of staff have a large amount of annual leave that they need to use up in the next 3 years. KC confirmed that this had arisen from the survey of staff benefits. Equal numbers of staff had responded that they would buy and sell leave and if this were the case then the scheme could be cost neutral if there was no great disparity in the grades of those buying and selling. JP noted that business plans would have to take account of this and he will discuss the matter at FREB. **Action: JP**
26. There is a possibility that staff would accrue increased TOIL. It was noted that TUS and management should encourage staff to take their entitled leave. KC will supply the FC data detailing the percentages of staff with given amounts of banked leave. **Action: KC**

## **Agenda Item 7 – Annualised hours**

27. KC was concerned, given our financial situation, with the amount of overtime being worked in some parts of FR and felt that the adoption of annualised hours for some field staff where more hours could be worked in the lighter, summer months and less in the darker, winter months might help reduce this. The TUS were invited to give their views. NF was concerned about the number of hours being worked by staff who were formerly in operational grades and also about what would happen if the annualised hours had been used up and additional work taken on? It was agreed that NF and KC would meet to discuss further and bear in mind the necessary protocols should any change be proposed that might have an impact on employment contracts. **Action: KC, NF**

## **Agenda Item 8 – Post filling/e-recruitment**

28. It was requested that management be reminded that unions should be involved before any potential new post is agreed and undertook to act as a 'longstop' to ensure the TUS was kept informed.

The new e-recruitment system may by-pass FR's HR team who were formerly responsible for contacting the TUS. **Action: KC**

### **Agenda Item 9 – Promotion procedure**

29. LA confirmed that the TUS wishes to pull together some thoughts on how FR's promotion procedures could be improved and will do so in time for the next round of promotions. **Action: LA**

### **Agenda Item 10 – Any other business.**

- 30 There were no further questions.

### **Agenda Item 11 – Date of next meeting.**

17<sup>th</sup> May 2010 14.00pm via video conf.

JP closed the meeting thanking the group for the constructive comments.