

Starting a New Year

January 13th 2014

As we move into the first weeks of 2014 I thought it would be timely to reflect on some of the important issues from 2013 and take a look ahead to see what 2014 may hold for union members here in the FC.

In March 2013 we saw the retirement of our colleague Robert Beaney who had been the Chair of FCTU for many years. This heralded the arrival of Mick Hoban into this important role.

During our [FCTU AGM](#) held in November we reported on many of the wide ranging issues including Pay, Progression, Health and Safety and Work-life Balance which we dealt with during the last year. Significantly on April 1st 2013 we saw the end of FC Wales and the creation of Natural Resources Wales which now includes our former colleagues in FC Wales.

FC England appointed a new Director Ian Gambles who brought together the three main projects being undertaken at that time: (1) a new organisation to manage the Public Forest Estate (PFEMO), (2) the delivery of Forestry Functions in England and (3) Cross Border Functions, under the Woodland Policy Enabling Programme (WPEP). It took some time to get meaningful consultation underway but once started FCTU were informed about the objectives of the programme and we were better able to inform union members on the potential outcomes and how they might be affected.

This led to the current mandate given to FCTU by members who have asked to maintain an integrated and sustainably resourced '[Forestry Commission for the Future](#)' and the current campaign in which we outlined the reasons for keeping the FC integrated and properly resourced. Members who attended campaign meetings endorsed the current mandate because the FC had failed to convince them that the alternatives being promoted through WPEP provided sufficient detail for them to assess any long-term benefits. FCTU have asked to see the relevant documents in relation to setting up the PFEMO and we have been assured that we will see these in good time for us to consider and comment on.

9th December 2013 saw a Ministerial decision and announcement by Defra in relation to transactional grant payments and technical advice. It stated that all grant payments and processing in England will be carried out by the Rural Payments Agency. Those members in Administrative posts who carry out transactional processing will be moved across into the RPA.

Technical functions on land-based schemes will be focussed in Natural England. The statement went on to say that the FC will remain the principal source of expert forestry advice. This announcement had obvious repercussions for many union members within Forest Services (FS) and as such FCTU held members meetings in key workplace locations just prior to Christmas. At these meetings we gathered views and questions which will form the basis of a report back to members and questions to FS senior managers.

As with the recent WPEP and FS meetings it really brought it home how valuable face to face meetings like those are as they allow members the opportunity to put across their views and comments and to vent their frustration and anger about how high level decisions are being taken without the underlying detail on the effects they will have on the individual.

In late December we started to learn more about '[One Business](#)' which is Defra's response to Civil Service Reform and 'Strategic Alignment' which is the approach they are using to get all parts of Defra and its executive agencies and NDPBs to work more closely with each other and to bring together their structures, systems and processes. This has resulted in numerous workstreams within Defra and we are already aware that some of these will impact on teams and individuals here in the FC.

Now that we are into 2014 we will start to hear more about these and other impacts and we will then need to determine how best to support union members through the changes emanating from WPEP and the 'Strategic Alignment' process.

2014 is a very significant year for Scotland as the Independence Referendum takes place in September. The outcome will hopefully answer the speculative questions relating to the FC and the relationship between Scotland and England.

In dealing with all the issues we need to ensure that members get good and timely information in a user-friendly format. Also making sure that those ordinary members have the opportunity to put their views and comments across and have their questions answered. Local union representatives have a key role in making sure this happens and that they in turn are supported by their constituent union and the wider FCTU network. It is only by engaging with members regularly that we will be able to fulfil our commitment to meaningful consultation and be better informed when we negotiate for the best possible outcomes that reflect the aspirations for the majority of those members.

We will need to ensure that we make the best use of our facility time, which is currently under review and consultation will close later this month with an implementation date of 1st April 2014. The new arrangements for facility time will place union duties under greater scrutiny and union activities more difficult to carry out during the working day.

The continued decline in the living standards due to the imposed pay policy is likely to remain a feature for 2014 with a further cap of 1%. The lack of progression is a cause for anger amongst union members; this will be the third year in which progression payments have been denied to hard working and loyal members of staff in the FC. This is a very live issue and unions are exploring every avenue to combat and challenge this very unfair policy. We have been successful in bringing forward the planned Equal Pay Audit and it will be interesting to see what solutions the FC will propose to reduce the currently alarming gender pay gap.

The FC are also embarking on a review of Operational Status as applied to pay band 5 and 6 (Ops). The review will consider whether operational status is still fit for purpose and if not what alternatives could be promoted to replace it. This is likely to affect significant numbers of union members and many views and comments will be expected.

I estimate that FCTU will again be very busy this year and it is worth noting that the post of Assistant Secretary comes to an end on March 31st 2014. We will continue to support union members, offer solutions to problems and continue to negotiate with the FC to gain the maximum benefits for all union members in the FC.

It is vital that we recruit more members, encourage more activism, develop more local representatives as well as train more Health and Safety reps along with more Union Learning reps. We need to increase our union density right across the FC in both England and Scotland, within Forest Research and in Silvan House. We need to see more local engagement in local consultation and we need to ensure better and appropriate communication across the entire union network here in the FC so that every member has the same information by which they can make positive decisions from a position of up to date knowledge.

It is worth remembering that only union members have the opportunity to influence and change the policies of the FC. If you do not yet belong to a union you should now give it serious consideration – information on how to join can be found on [FCTU website](http://www.fctu.org.uk).

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