

FCTU GB Initial Response to Forestry Functions Review

This document is intended to be an aid to the FCTU network in responding to the review and to inform FC England of the issues that are of concern to us with this review.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the principal aims that have been agreed by the FCTU:

- *The FCTU call upon the Government to acknowledge the importance of keeping the Forestry Commission and the Forest Estate under public ownership for the use and benefit of all;*
- *Staff of the FC should remain as Civil Servants and the FC should continue as that part of Government which manages the Public Forest Estate, provides wide ranging Forest Services and continues with high quality Forest Research. The FC should maintain democratic accountability through Parliament;*
- *We call for the Government to recognise the very widespread public desire to maintain an appropriately funded and sustainably resourced FC to protect the delivery of forest ecosystem services, and to develop the capacity of this unique public asset for the people, the environment and future generations;*
- *We call on the government to recognise that the current FC is much more than just a sum of its parts – it has the depth of competent staff with the right amounts of expertise and professionalism to enable the FC to rise to new challenges, take advantage of new opportunities and react positively to natural threats;*
- *To build a flexible and sustainable long-term (25 years+) strategy for publicly owned forests to be taken forward by successive governments;*
- *The arbitrary cuts that have been applied to the Forestry Commission for nearly two decades, fundamentally compromising the FC's ability to deliver the needs and expectations of society, should now be reversed and re-invested in the PFE, by the Forestry Commission, to ensure long-term, high quality benefits for now and the future.*

Before commenting on the specifics of the review we have some general questions that relate to the review and are as follows;

- What is the timetable?
- When will the outcome of the triennial review (or any preliminary outcome) be announced?
- Will a report on the forestry review be published in early July or not, and will it be before or after the stakeholder forum?
- Will these questions be discussed with stakeholders on 3 July? Or with any stakeholders in advance of 3 July?
- Are there only these 4 options for FS /FC?
- What is the influence of views expressed at the 11 April stakeholder forum on the evolving options?

In response to the review we would ask the following:

1. Cross-border:

- Is one extreme in the range that there will be UK wide plant health and research functions?
- What does collaborating mean here?
- What body or bodies will deliver plant health and research?
- Will Forest Research stand alone?
- Or will Forest Research be moved into DEFRA or FERA?
- Will plant health be moved into DEFRA or FERA?
- Does this variable also refer to forestry support services, currently mostly cross-border?

2. Organisation:

- Why is the baseline, the current arrangement, a non-ministerial government department, not included in this range?
- FC Commissioners are not mentioned so are they to be scrapped?
- What does direct ministerial responsibility mean? Does it mean moving functions into DEFRA?
- What does public body mean? Does it mean NDPB or something else?
- Is it suggested that the public body would be Forest Services standing alone or with other parts of FC?

4. Forestry functions and other bodies:

- Why is the baseline, with corporate and forestry support functions within FC, the current single forestry body, not included in this range?
- Why is it assumed that a stand alone body must have some 'back office' functions integrated with other organisations?
- Is it to be assumed that FCGB corporate functions are to be scrapped?

Comments on the variables

1. Cross-border:

- Our preference is for the baseline, with evolution (with consultation) of cross-border arrangements when and where needed
- currently Wales has not withdrawn use of FC GB services, and Scotland is some way off any decision
- Separating cross-border corporate functions and going it alone in England could preempt decisions by Scotland and Wales to cease using FC GB corporate functions
- Forestry support provides specialist services which are essential for delivering forestry policy
- Corporate services are efficient – they are already shared between the 3 countries – and effective, professional and specialist, and have been devised to provide the expertise to support the delivery of forestry policy
- We are concerned at the impact on the forestry support and corporate services of a move to organising these for England only
- The further extreme of the range refers only to collaboration on plant health and research, rather than GB wide delivery of these functions, and this must raise further questions
- Research and plant health are extremely important to delivery of forestry policy, and would be best delivered by an integrated forestry body at a GB level. It may be worth noting that, to date, Research Councils and Universities are not interested in picking up forestry research (mainly, I think, because it doesn't fit with 3 year PhD cycles), and no-one else has the capacity to provide a comprehensive service, based on free access to the PFE in all 3 countries.
- The tree health task force report just published has called for simplified and strengthened governance, which is more coherent and more effective. This option appears to suggest further fragmentation which contradicts those aims
- The tree health task force report says a first step to improving plant health has already been implemented, by transferring the plant health policy team from FERA to DEFRA. Does this suggest the same will happen to parts of FC that deal with plant health?

2. Organisation:

- Our preference is for the arrangement as it is now
- A Non Ministerial government department is the best option, particularly if it were to operate as a true non-Ministerial government department, with the authority to act without interference by the Minister. This would provide true operational independence from the government for the whole of the forestry functions currently carried out by FC
- The very minimum organisational arrangement we consider acceptable/preferable would be a single forestry body

- We question why the Forestry Commission an effective, integrated, efficient body, should be broken up
- We are very concerned about the possibility of establishing an NDPB to deliver forestry policy, as such an organisation is more directly controlled by the Minister and is vulnerable to abolition or merger
- We are also concerned about an option that brings forestry functions into DEFRA and further under the control of the Minister, as there is a danger of losing focus on integrated forestry functions and of losing forestry expertise

3. Integration of forestry functions with each other:

- We would prefer to see the baseline as now, with fully integrated forestry functions within the Forestry Commission, including FEE, and we believe breaking up the Forestry Commission is a retrograde step
- At the very least we would want to see the whole of FC GB kept as a single forestry body as far as possible
- Dispersing forestry functions to other public bodies will destroy the possibility of delivering the government's forestry policy, protect, improve, expand, and will risk losing the achievements of the FC to date.
- There will be impacts on jobs, terms and conditions, career possibilities for staff, leading to further loss of expertise
- Several at the 11 April stakeholder Forum suggested that some functions should move from DEFRA and other bodies to FC – is this suggestion being pursued?

4. Integration of forestry functions with other bodies:

- Our preference is for a stand-alone body without integrating the 'back office' functions with other organisations
- Strongly against merging forestry body with larger bodies or making it part of a larger organisation with a wider remit
- 11 April stakeholder Forum clearly rejected merger options and appeared to favour a single forestry body
- Arguments put by us, and by many other stakeholders including forest campaign and user groups, forestry and wood products industry and some NGOs, against merger are clear. In summary: forestry would be subsumed, we would lose the focus on forestry, lose forest expertise, would be attempting to combine very different remits, and any merger would threaten the delivery of the government's forestry policy to protect, improve, expand, it would be a costly, disruptive distraction from the important work that needs to be done under the forestry policy
- Integrating the so-called 'back office' should not be automatically assumed to be at one end of the range, such a possibility should be carefully examined Forestry support provides specialist services which are essential for delivering forestry policy
- Corporate services are efficient – they are already shared between the 3 countries – and effective, professional and specialist, and have the expertise to support the delivery of forestry policy
- Integrating these functions with those from other organisations would seriously threaten the delivery of forestry policy
- Integration in England would threaten corporate FC GB functions, precipitating the scrapping of the organisation, with a serious impact on jobs in Scotland and perhaps ultimately in England
- Such an integration would be costly, inefficient, ineffective and destructive
- Any merger or integration would have an impact on jobs and terms and conditions, career prospects, and risk losing expertise
- Joint working with other bodies could be developed and expanded

5. Amount of change:

- Our preference is for no major change, i.e. to keep the Forestry Commission
- This doesn't mean that the organisation couldn't evolve and improve, as long as that is done with proper consultation and discussion
- FC needs proper funding

- There should be a sensible response to devolution, tree health recommendations and grant changes etc, not one that pre-empts those

Response to key questions

Question 1

- Our preference is for the baseline, with evolution (with consultation) of cross-border arrangements when and where needed
- Our preference is for the arrangement as now
- We would prefer to see the baseline as now, with fully integrated forestry functions within the Forestry Commission, including FEE, and we believe breaking up the Forestry Commission is a retrograde step
- Our preference is for a stand-alone body without integrating the 'back office' functions with other organisations
- Our preference is for no major change, i.e. to keep the Forestry Commission

Question 2

- All of these variables and all aspects of the potential changes are important to FCTU, and we don't think ranking them would be helpful
- In our opinion forestry policy is currently delivered effectively and efficiently by a forestry specific body in the UK, the Forestry Commission, we see no reason to break that up or scrap it, risking the achievements that have been made at extremely low cost to the government and the taxpayer, and nearly 100 years of evolving expertise
- We want to see forestry functions and support in one forestry body, which could perhaps add further functions from other bodies, of course with additional funding
- The FC needs proper funding
- Any dilutions, splitting up, merger, of FC we believe will threaten the effective delivery of forestry policy

Question 3

Possible new variables (6, 7, 8):

6. Sufficient funding for the Forestry Commission, with one end of the range being the amount of money recommended by the independent forestry panel, ranging to a higher level of funding so that we can do even more even better

7. Establish the Forestry Commission as a true non-ministerial government Department, removing the interference by ministers in funding and other decisions, other than oversight, with a long-term secure existence and expanded remit

8. Keep Forest Enterprise England within the Forestry Commission, establishing it with true public corporation status together with sufficient public funding, and improving and increasing its engagement with people

Question 4

Other comments on the review:

- The link with the triennial review of two DEFRA NDPBs is extremely unhelpful, as is the way that the 2 reviews are connected but those involved in the forestry review are unable to influence the other one
- The secrecy on both reviews is extremely unhelpful
- We are totally unconvinced of the imperatives to change – FC is not broken so why fix it, other than by properly funding it and giving it a secure long-term existence?
- There should be proper public consultation, including an analysis of the impact on management and amenity of forests on any proposals to change forestry organisations or how forestry policy is delivered before considering implementing change

- Splitting up forestry into functions rather than considering whole organisations is unhelpful and means that proper account is not taken of the achievements of the organisation

Conclusion

At the start of this briefing we outlined our key principal aims and our response to this review is to reiterate our current mandate to ensure that the FC is kept as the organisation to deliver forestry policy whilst continuing to be the professional stewards in managing the Public Forest Estate, and providing best benefit to the public.

We also believe that there is always room for further improvement in how the organisation meets the challenges in the future and this is what should be concentrated upon and help the FC to evolve without the need to break up a very respected and efficient organisation which is held in high regard by the public.

As stated at the outset this briefing is just an initial reaction to the opening of the consultation and is intended to aid the thinking of union members and become engaged in this process so that a fuller and wider range of views can be gathered to build the final response from FCTU England.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "a. J. MacKenzie". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'a'.

Allan MacKenzie
FCTU Departmental Secretary
10 June 2013