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| SF_col_landscape_logo | Senior Operations Group Minutes |

**22nd February 2024,**

**Birnam Arts Centre and Microsoft Teams**

***Draft for approval***

**Present:**

Brendan Callaghan, Head of Operational Delivery (BC)

Zahid Deen, Head of Operational Services and Transformation (ZD)

Alan Hampson, Head of Policy and Practice (AH)

Doug Howieson, Conservator, South Scotland (DH)

Steven Hutcheon, Conservator, Grampian (SH)

Cameron Maxwell Conservator Perth and Argyll (CM)

Neil Murray, Conservator, Highland (NM)

Keith Wishart, Conservator, Central Scotland (KW)

**In Attendance:**

Gary Henderson, Senior Finance Manager (GH) – for item 4

Marliese Richmond (MR) - for item 5

Simon Franks (SF) for item 6

Marius Sleeuwenhoek (MS) – for item 7

Mark Pearson (MP) – for item 7

Jenny Greaves (taking minutes)

**Apologies:**

Helen McKay, Chief Forester (HM)

1. **Welcome and declarations of interest**

BC welcomed everyone to the meeting. BC welcomed Jenny Greaves to the meeting who will now be supporting the meetings and taking minutes..

1. **Woodland Creation progress update**

* BC – extended claim deadline note has gone out and been well received. An internal note with more details on processing claims to the new deadline will be going out soon.
* Discussion on the potential budget breakdown. BC confirmed conservancies will see in advance of the external release the level of funds available for each category.
* Still pressure from private and third sector to increase budget but no movement from SG.
* Budget published on 27th February with detailed information note planned to go out at the end of w/c 26th February.
* Discussion on making 2025 capital commitments) and the potential to overcommit on WC by up to 10% in 2024.
* Variations. Need to take a hard line. No variations considered until claim deadline of May 17th. Possibility of using over commitment ‘buffer’ but there are still two clearing rounds to go.
* Has proved complex to develop a mechanism to better integrate FGS and Woodland Carbon Code (WCC) funding. Sector are lobbying for WCC additionality rules to be changed and are reluctant to agree to reduced FGS contributions until this is resolved,
* New (voluntary) budget category proposed for large schemes with a lower FGS £/ha rate. Details on how this would be processed need working out. Project being set up to look at this.
* AH – Money from DEFRA is funding WCC to look at options around changes to additionality rules.
* Vicky West doing further training in some conservancies on WCC. More WCC training required across the board but not a priority now.
* **Action: BC to invite Pat and/or Andy (WCC) to next SOG to give update.**

1. **Proposed Changes – Purchase Orders and invoicing - GH**

* New finance systems due to go live in July. Keep using EEMS until then.
* From 01/04/2024 all spends to have Purchase Order (except FGS, staff costs and EEMS). Purchase orders (PO) to be raised in advance.
* This is to bring all invoicing into Saughton House to help streamline invoicing processes, so SF know in advance what is being spent and because Scottish government want more transparency on what is being spent.
* For spends that are uncertain, for example energy bills, these can be sent directly into Saughton without rising a PO.
* To confirm delivery of goods or service, tick ‘receipt’ on EFin.
* Engagement with TUS ongoing in relation to this proposed change in working practices
* Training to SET in June.

1. **Health, Safety and Wellbeing MR and NM**

* Shared the paper ‘ Health, Safety and Wellbeing: Governance, Policy and Resourcing’. The paper has three aims: 1) Present and obtain sign off for the Health and Safety and Wellbeing policy. SF could be viewed as not currently compliant as no signed Health and Safety Policy. 2) Present an overview of our Health, Safety and Wellbeing governance arrangements and flag gaps regarding our legal obligations as currently understood and 3) Flag issues in relation to the resourcing and coordination of the work required to implement the Policy.
* Discussion around the health and safety policy. Agreement to **RECOMMEND** Paul Lowe signs the Health and Safety Policy.
* Recognition that some national H&S procedures need to be reinstated . . Discussion on how this would be resourced. SOG is obvious route of governance of Health and Safety, giving intelligent oversight, but resource still needed to deliver it.
* **Action: SOG members to read policy and get back to NM with any comments by 8th March.**
* **Action: Once comments received, policy to go to CEO for sign off.**
* **Action: NM to share outcomes of recent H&S audits with group.**

1. **Public Register project – SF**

* Went through paper and discussed salient points and the updated process.
* All FGS cases, over a minimum size, must have undertaken Due Diligence, been on Public Register and had EIA screening prior to being submitted.
* 12 Week consultation period will give clarity and a defined end point to consultations.
* Screening opinion request to be included in Ops plans.
* **Action: SF to send out link to WC guidance in the S drive so SOG members can view.**
* MS and MP gave a demonstration of new front facing public register. Showed how cases can be searched for using google maps. Functionality for uploading documents not done yet.
* SOG agreed it was good to see the progress being made.

1. **AOB:**

* **Recruitment panel**. KW and DH highlighted the impact of the new recruitment panel process for recruiting staff in conservancies. They highlighted the need to quickly advertise positions to ensure continuity in front line delivery and to reduce stress in remaining staff. KW explained that in FLS, whilst they also have a recruitment panel, this is lighter touch for front line staff. DH stated that conservancies are under extreme pressure, which is exacerbated due to staffing gaps and asked that the process be more streamlined and that other options should be explored. ZD responded that the panel has just been set up and is there to help address the challenging financial position – that it is not just about one part of the business, and the intention is to take a consistent approach to assessing all staff requests.
* **Deer.** Jamie Hammond, NatureScot sent out a list of expectations of what he thinks SF should be doing.**Action: NM to send around the group to agree a response from SOG. AH needs comments by 4th March when the next steering group meeting.**
* **Biodiversity.** AH saidHelen Sellers is working on a paper on biodiversity in forestry.
* **Action: AH to arrange for Helen Sellers to bring paper to the next SOG meeting.**

1. **Date of Next Meeting**

21st March 2024.

**SOG Action List**

| **Ref** | **Meeting** | **Action** | **Lead / Staff Member** | **Target Date** | **Status** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1.1 | Feb 24 | BC to invite Pat and / or Andy (WCC) to next SOG to give update. | BC | 21/03/24 | Open |
| 1.2 | Feb 24 | SOG members to read policy and get back to NM with any comments. | NM | 08/03/24 | Open |
| 1.3 | Feb 24 | H, S & W policy to go to CEO for sign off. | NM | 21/03/24 | Open |
| 1.4 | Feb 24 | NM to share outcomes of recent H&S audits with group. | NM | 21/03/24 | Open |
| 1.5 | Feb 24 | SF to send out link to WC guidance in the S drive so SOG members can view. | SF | 21/03/24 | Closed |
| 1.6 | Feb 24 | NM to send around the comments from Jamie Hammond to the group to agree a response from SOG. AH needs comments by the next steering group meeting. | NM | 04/03/24 | Open |
| 1.7 | Feb 24 | AH to arrange for Helen Sellers to bring paper to the next SOG meeting. | AH | 21/03/24 | Open |