

**NOTES OF OUR FORESTS MEETING held on 14 October 2011
at the SYLVA Foundation Little Wittenham**

Present: Hen Anderson, Richard Daniels, Gabriel Hemery, Tony Juniper,
Robin Maynard, Jonathon Porritt

Apologies: Rod Leslie

- **Updates on the Work of the Independent Panel**

We reviewed what we've heard about the workings of the Independent Panel, and the kind of timetable that they are now working to. As we understand it, the interim report will be out towards the end of November / early December. In January next year, there will be a big 'Stakeholders Event', and then some 'Select Committee Hearings' in January and February. The intention is still to have the final report done by April.

We all commented on how successfully this long-winded process has sucked any energy out of the debate about the future of the Public Forest Estate! This is clearly something that we will need to counter as and when we can.

- **Freedom of Information Requests**

We reviewed the responses from both Defra and the Forestry Commission to our FoI requests regarding the meetings earlier in the year between Defra and the Forestry Commission with representatives of various national NGOs.

The response from the Forestry Commission was considered to be fairly useful. Defra's response was wholly inadequate.

The following paragraph, for instance, induced a combination of despair and hysterical laughter on our part:

"We recognise that there is a public interest in disclosure of information concerning government meetings and discussions about the future of England's public forest estate. However, where incorrect assumptions are made or expectations raised through publication of discussions and views exchanged in earlier communications, government staff resources would need to be diverted to respond to any incorrect media stories and campaigning based on such stories. Given the ongoing heightened interest in forestry policy, there would be a clear risk of being drawn into a public debate on matters which are not government policy. Therefore we have concluded that in most of the circumstances for this case, the information relating to notes of meetings and discussions should be withheld."

We were also of the opinion that responses from the NGOs weren't that much better, in terms of lack of transparency, detailed information and so on.

On those grounds, we have decided that:

- We will pursue a formal complaint regarding Defra's response as a manifest abuse of both the broad principles and the specific guidelines under the Freedom of Information Act. We will seek legal advice as to how best to set about this.

- We will press specifically for the minutes of the meetings with the National Trust, the Wildlife Trusts and the Woodland Trust to be made public under the Freedom of Information Act – given how important it is to ensure that those organisations (as members of the Independent Panel) are held to the highest standards of transparency and accountability.

- **Our Forest Vision**

- We agreed that Robin should press on with the first draft of the Vision paper with a view to having this completed as soon as possible. We will then work together to secure agreement on a final draft by the end of November.

Above all, we want to make sure that our Vision provides a compelling and accessible case for the maintenance and expansion of the Public Forest estate – seen through the three lenses of People (P), the Forests and woodlands themselves (F) and Economics (E) – PFE!

- Getting the Vision out there

Getting the Vision signed-off is one thing; getting it out there, to have as much impact on the work of the Independent Panel as possible is another!

We agreed that we would develop a full-on distribution and outreach strategy for our Vision, with the following specific responsibilities:

*Tony: investigating the possibility of finding a Media Partner
(? The Independent)*

Rich/Hen: working with campaigning groups and local activist groups

Gabriel: working on a full academic engagement strategy

Rod/Hen: working with forestry practitioners

Jonathon: re-approaching 38Degrees

- We then spent the rest of the meeting reviewing the key content areas for the Vision – and were delighted to discover near unanimity on all the key elements that will need to be included in it!

- **Why are we doing all this?**

Hen was very keen that we should each provide a rather more interesting and personal account of why we are all involved in Our Forests! We haven't really brought that to life yet, but some people will definitely want to know more why we're doing all this as and when the Vision starts to get out there. Hen will make sure we each produce a personal statement of some kind over the next few weeks.