



Forestry Contracting Association

Chairman's Report to the AGM of the Forestry Contracting Association, 2023.

As years go, this one has gone like every other. By now we know exactly the challenges our members will face and the requests for assistance will reflect all the usual problems. However, this year your board has also had to reflect on the sustainability of the forestry sector, the businesses within it (all of them) and of course, the Association itself. We have concluded that none can go on as before.

As the country's financial chickens come home to roost, we are likely to see some major changes take place. These will see some people more marginalised than ever, and others forced out altogether. In truth, a 'reset' is long overdue, but as the wealth and power lies in the hands of so few, it seems unlikely that hard working forestry Contractors will feature very highly in the discussions on how this reset will work in practice.

We expect to see the public sector forestry bodies come under pressure like never before. Forestry & Land Scotland (FLS) Forestry England (FE) and Natural Resources Wales (NRW) seem to lurch from one crisis to the next. Now you all know what I think of some of those who have the reins of these 'businesses' but it now looks like their paymasters are starting to ask difficult questions too. Make no mistake about it, the financial support could dry up pretty quickly and these are expensive operations to run. Unfortunately, their problems can easily turn into our problems. Many Contractors rely on them for work, either directly, or as subcontractors to the big forest management company's who also have a major stake in them.

Sustainable forestry as we understand it hasn't been sustainable for many years now. It's too long term for a lot of the people who have influence over it. Unfortunately, the majority of the people who do the real graft are not rewarded well enough to continue taking the business risks involved. Many struggle to get out, for a variety of reasons, but as soon as the right opportunity arises they are gone. As these businesses close, or diversify into other activities, they are replaced by less experienced ones and the whole cycle repeats. The signs that the cycle will eventually break have been around for some time now, yet no-one is doing anything about it. This suggests that someone, somewhere, doesn't think it important.

Any plans to introduce change, however dramatic, will always be debated and agreed at some high level, long before anyone who will be directly affected is ever consulted. Indeed, people like Contractors cannot ever truly be consulted, because our best interests seldom align with theirs. Remember, we are the 'supply chain', a means to an end, and the supply chain is where any changes (cuts) will be made first. In the past it has always been about cutting costs, never about the quality of the leadership, but the latter will come into sharp focus soon. Unfortunately, we expect to see cuts as well.

The question is can the system, or whatever it morphs into, provide sufficient genuine opportunities for individuals who have the mindset of a forestry Contractor. Determined, hard working, and dare I say it, ambitious people, who will overcome any challenge put in front of them. They are the backbone of this industry. If we strip away Contractors tomorrow, we will have nothing. Whether by accident or design, there is now a real question surrounding the future of forestry contracting, a significant provider of employment in many rural areas. Do they really think that people will continue to work 12 hour days, 365 days a year, for the same reward as those who work 7 hours a day, and for so few days. Divide the amount you earn by the huge number of hours you work and tell me what your hourly pay really is, and is this truly sustainable.

I want to finish on the future of the Forestry Contracting Association itself. Our membership numbers can go up and down a bit from year to year but this year has seen it fall from 413 down to 360. Of course this means a drop in turnover and despite us watching our expenditure very carefully, a corresponding drop in profit, which was £5537 for the year. Given that our volunteers are working harder than ever, we are struggling to see why we could lose so many members. Of course we could just ask them, but this exposes the real weakness of an organisation that is run solely by volunteers. As forestry contractors, working hard to maintain their own businesses in a tough environment, there are only so many hours in the day to get



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Association business done and it is becoming increasingly unfair to expect volunteers to do so much in their 'spare' time.

The answer is we need to employ someone to take up some of this workload. This should plug a rather obvious gap we have found in our service provision. We need to be more persistent in our requests for answers from those who just stonewall questions. Truthfully, people have discovered our Achilles heel and they know how to exploit it. The worst offenders are in the public sector, who take forever to deal with anything.

This won't provide any respite for our volunteers, because no-one that I know will be able to do all this on their own. So we still need our volunteers, particularly the younger ones, who will continue to shape the Association going forward, ensuring it is relevant to modern contracting businesses.

Where are we to find such a super human? Do they exist? How much is it going to cost us? More than we can afford, most likely. But like replacing a broken diff, some things have to be bought, whether you can afford them or not.

So if you are reading this and haven't paid your subscription, please think about it. It's entirely voluntary and if you no longer want to contribute, that's fine. But if we are to increase our efforts and more importantly, improve the outcome of those efforts, the only way we can see this happening is for us to employ someone to do some of the work. Without subscription income, we could look at other possible income streams, but without members, the long term sustainability of the FCA would be called into question.

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