

Agenda Item 12 COMMISSIONERS MEETING Memo No 08/17

22 March 2017

ENGLAND COUNTRY REPORT, DIRECTOR ENGLAND

Woodland Creation

From the 2016 applications for Countryside Stewardship (CS), we have issued agreements for approximately 990 hectares of woodland, to date. The agreements are for 2 years, so we cannot say when these will be planted until the planting is claimed for.

Woodland creation continues to be a priority for delivery to support the Government's commitment to plant 11 million trees this parliament. A new round of woodland creation applications for Countryside Stewardship was announced on 8th December 2016 and the application window was open from 3rd January to 1st March. Close to 200 applications were received by the deadline with further 'stragglers' expected – we are currently evaluating these applications and will know the area of potential planting covered by these initial applications in mid-March.

Environmental Impact Assessment Consultation

The Government consultation on transposing the amended Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Directive into English law, including possible changes to the thresholds for afforestation projects, has now closed. Consultation responses showed highly polarised positions between the commercial forestry sector and environmental NGOs. Many respondents were supportive of the aspiration to create more woodland but not at the expense of other rare habitats. Ministers are currently considering the Government's response.

Officials' recommendation is for an increase in the afforestation threshold from 5 to 50 hectares in areas identified as being at Low Risk to woodland creation. Outside Low Risk Areas the existing procedure for screening proposals would continue at the current thresholds. However, the recommendation to Ministers is that FC is notified of any afforestation proposals between 2 and 5 ha, regardless of location, to better allow the FC to fulfil its duty to have regard for biodiversity under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act.

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Camping in the Forest- Sherwood

The Estates and Recreation and Public Affairs teams at Sherwood Pines have been working with partners at Camping in the Forest (CITF) towards the delivery of a new campsite. Sherwood Pines is also home to Forest Holidays cabins and this development will help broaden the accommodation offer on the site.

Currently at the planning stage, the CITF proposals are for a year-round camping and caravan touring site for about 200 pitches, two amenity blocks, four service areas and waste facilities, together with the required parking. The planned layout has been developed to make sure the campsite will blend in to the woodland setting, and the forest will remain in continuous cover with only minimal tree loss across the site. As with the rest of Sherwood Pines, these areas within the site will be carefully managed and enhanced under the site Woodland Management Plan.

Gruffalo Spotters

In February Forest Enterprise England (FEE) launched new interactive trails at 26 forests across England where visitors can download an augmented reality app to bring The Gruffalo characters to life.

Clues will lead visitors to five different footprint markers in the forest for each one of the characters from the book. Thanks to augmented reality technology, when visitors point their phone cameras at the footprint markers, the characters will appear to blend in within the forest. This is an exciting development that has been reported extremely positively in the media that will deliver a completely different forest experience for our visitors.

Seismic surveying in the Sherwood Forest area

INEOS, who hold a Petroleum Exploration and Development Licence (PEDL) for the area from the Oil and Gas Authority, have requested access to the Public Forest Estate (PFE) in north Nottinghamshire to carry out seismic surveys on PFE land. These surveys will help determine the possible extent of shale gas in the local area. Friends of the Earth (FoE) and the Campaign Group 38 Degrees have presented separate petitions to Defra and the FC National Office opposing fracking in the area. FoE has also made a number of associated FOI requests.

The Forestry Commission will support government policy on hydrocarbons. There is no independent FC policy on fracking, and we will treat an application for access for surveys under our standard procedure for requests for access for activities on the PFE. Contrary to media coverage, FCE does not manage the historic core of Sherwood Forest - the Major Oak (the iconic hiding place of Robin Hood) which has been the focus of demonstrations is not on FC land.

Latchmore Wetland Restoration Project

Following the Planning Authority's decision to refuse planning permission for the Latchmore wetland restoration project in the New Forest, the Verderers' Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) Board decided against supporting an appeal against the decision. The England National Committee noted that without the support of the HLS Board the Forestry Commission was left with no option but to accept the decision. The condition of the SSSI will, however, continue to deteriorate in the absence of the restoration scheme.

Local MP Desmond Swayne, who had spoken out against the plans for Latchmore, has referred the Verderers' HLS Scheme to the National Audit Office (NAO) on two issues:

- *"whether the arrangements give rise to any issues of dual funding, given the Forestry Commission's existing statutory obligations for which it already receives government funding"* and
- *"the procedures in place to ensure that the work performed under the HLS scheme is appropriately controlled and monitored"*.

The NAO investigation has widened through additional concerns raised by members of the public following media reports of the referral to NAO. FCE provided a comprehensive response to a request for information from the NAO in January and attended a meeting with the NAO Director in charge of the investigation on 10 March. The meeting included a site visit to one of the restored areas that the NAO had received correspondence concerning. We are currently working through the follow up issues from the meeting and the NAO are keen to conclude their investigation with a report to the MP as soon as possible.

We are confident that there has not been any dual funding and we recognise that there could be improvements to the monitoring of the outcomes. To address these improvements a new Monitoring Officer has been appointed to spearhead scientific studies to assess the impact of the wetland restoration.

Transfer of FCE Communications Team to Defra

As part of the Defra group strategy, communications teams and other corporate services are working more closely together. From 1 February 2017 the FCE Communications team transferred to Defra Communications. The objectives of this change are to help build links and share expertise across the Defra Group, save money, reduce duplication, act together more effectively and make things simpler and better for our customers. The England National Committee has been briefed on this development.

The team will continue to maintain strong connections with FEE Marketing and Communications and with FR colleagues; neither FEE nor FR staff have transferred to Defra.

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Ecotricity Partnership

A new partnership between FEE and Ecotricity will see Ecotricity donate up to £50 for anyone who signs up to the company's green electricity and gas using the Forestry Commission sign-up offer. The donations will support new conservation projects on the PFE, generating additional revenue to continue conservation work carried out by FCE. New Ecotricity customers will also receive a £10 discount on a Discovery Pass.

Lobslack Nursery Redevelopment

The redevelopment of Lobslack Nursery started on the return back from the Christmas break on the 2nd January 2017. The contract has been awarded to CambridgeHOK a well-established Glasshouse builder based in East Yorkshire.

Works are on programme and items completed to date include the demolition of the polytunnels and water tanks, realignment of fencing, start of road construction and installation of ducting for new utilities connections.

Since the 27th February we have had a team on site from Holland constructing the foundations to the new Glasshouse. This will be completed in mid-March, then followed by the steel frame construction. We are currently programmed to have the Glasshouse water tight shell constructed, a functioning lagoon and spillway system all in place by the end of April.

Forest Art Works

Keith Harrison has been announced as the winner of Jerwood Open Forest 2016 and will be awarded a £30,000 commission to realise his project 'Joyride' at Cannock Chase Forest in autumn 2017. The winning commission will see a clay replica of a Rover 75 moving down a specially constructed roller coaster style ramp and will provide a commentary on the rise and fall of car manufacturing in the area.

A piece of interactive artwork co-commissioned by the Forestry Commission has won [WIRED magazine's Innovation in Experience Design award](#). The piece - In the Eyes of the Animal, by artists Marshmallow Laser Feast - is a virtual reality experience that gives a unique insight into the inner life of a forest by allowing viewers to see it as a midge, a dragonfly, a frog or an owl.