

Ref: AFG 2/2021

AFG minutes: 23 February 2021**Location:** Webinar / teleconference**Chair:** Joe Watts**Prepared by:** Harriette Dulake**Attendees****AFG members:**Adrian Jowitt (Natural England) **AJ**Alisha Anstee (NFU) **AA**Caroline Ayre (Confor) **CA**David Lewis (RICS) **DL**Graham Clark (CLA) **GC**Graham Garratt (ICF) **GG**Jackie Dunne (Confor) **JD**James Russell (Community Forests) **JR**John Blessington (Local Government) **JB**Julian Ohlsen (SW AFG) **JO**Neil Douglas (RSPB) **ND**Neville Elstone (ICF) **NE**Paul Orsi (Sylva) **POr**Stan Abbott (WT) **SA****FC/Defra Group:**Alec Rhodes (FC) **AR**Amanda Weddell (Defra) **AW**Angharad Morgan (Defra) **AM**Claire Douglas (RPA) **CD**Harriette Dulake (FC) **HD**Hugh Williams (FC) **HW**Joe Watts (FC) **JW**Mark Broadmeadow (FC) **MB**Melanie Edgar (FC) **ME**Penny Oliver (FC) **POI**Stephanie Rhodes (FC) **SR**Rory Lunny (Defra) **RL**Yvonne Wood (FC) **YW****Apologies**

Adrian Sherwood (RPA)

Brian Fraser (HTA)

Andy Shirley-Priest (RFS)

AFG Minutes

Welcome

JW welcomed the group and particularly Stan Abbott (Woodland Trust) to his first meeting.

English Woodland Creation Grant – Eligibility Criteria

AR ran through the slides.

AR asked the group for their thoughts on whether the structure should be aimed at awarding more funding to more applicants or whether it should focus on rewarding applicants with schemes that are harder to achieve.

ND replied that in principle, the RSPB are in favour of a stackable system however he emphasised that woodlands created under this scheme should prioritise biodiversity, given that the funding is under the Nature for Climate Fund. He raised concerns that other supplements may be given higher weighting at the expense of biodiversity. **JW** responded that this was something to consider but highlighted that all schemes would have to be UKFS compliant.

JB asked what would be considered “hard to achieve”. He noted that whilst, for example, woodlands on hills are harder to establish, it is often urban woodlands that are costly to maintain and harder to guarantee sufficient stocking density. He highlighted the importance of urban woodlands and said that the scheme should be effective in encouraging and supporting them.

GG said that the state should be intervening to mitigate market failure, and therefore should focus on woodland that would otherwise not be created by market forces. He said public funding should be used efficiently so funding for extremely challenging woodland would not be good value for money.

GC said that the scheme should try and address both, given the ambitious government tree targets. He agreed that the state should mitigate market failure but also said that as many people as possible should be incentivised to create woodland. He added that CLA members seem to prefer payments per hectare, however noted that if standard costs applied then 80% was a reasonable intervention rate.

JD said that the proposed structure seemed to be addressing both, with capital payments meeting the wider shallow angle and the supplements allowing a more targeted public good approach.

ACTION: AR to share survey results with AFG.

CA agreed with other members of the group, stating that whilst government targets mean there needs to be a lot of planting, it is important to not perpetuate market failures by creating woodland that does not deliver benefits for the future.

Biodiversity/Nature Recovery

GG asked why biodiversity was capped at 1,600 stems per hectare and agreed with **ND** that this could clash with other supplements, leaving biodiversity marginalised. **NE** agreed. **AR** responded that the next steps would be to look at how the different eligibilities would stack up against one another.

CA raised concerns that the approach would perpetuate the binary of productive woodlands versus woodlands for biodiversity. **NE** agreed.

ND asked how lower stocking densities for some species interact with the biodiversity eligibility, for example with black grouse planting.

JD raised concerns that the criteria was too prescriptive. She continued that she was worried that applicants who have already gone through a planning process (for example the Woodland Creation Planning Grant) would be in a situation where they've got an approved plan but it would not match the eligibility criteria. **AR** responded that the criteria ensures that benefits are delivered and so justifies the payment.

JR agreed with earlier comments around stocking densities, saying that the criteria seem too binary. He stated that more work needs to be done to look at how to incentivise woodlands for nature recovery and highlighted the guidance in Bulletin 112.

CA said that forestry and agricultural production needed to be integrated but also support the wider benefits that productive land can deliver, for example natural capital. **GG** commented that it seemed the supplements do recognise and reward specific purposes and outcomes however it would be difficult to balance the specific eligibilities with general understanding and recognition.

DL asked whether there could be more flexibility on the minimum width, for example shelterbelts at 10 metres in width could provide biodiversity benefits but would be ineligible for the supplement. **AR** agreed that shelterbelts, as well as riparian planting, could provide valuable habitats. He asked the group whether the current Countryside Stewardship threshold of 3 hectares acts as a blocker for landowners.

Group all agreed that the CS thresholds act as a blocker for landowners, particularly on farms. **GG** commented that schemes under 3 hectares to be very light on admin to be worthwhile for landowners.

Water – natural flood management

NE said the importance of Environment Agency support and engagement. He also suggested that applicants could get support from lead local flood authorities or local flood action groups which would pick up micro sites that are not picked up in data layers. He argued this would create a more nuanced, local approach that could make a real difference in preventing flooding in communities, particularly surface water flooding. **MB** responded that the EA Priority Catchments maps are being used which look at reducing flooding at individual house level, but that Forest Research maps were also being used to ensure that woodland creation would help to prevent flooding.

NE argued that engaging with local communities was really importance and that support from local flooding authorities is key. He argued that if data sets do not pick up on local information, then other forms of evidence should be considered. **JD** agreed, saying that flooding has been difficult to get data on in CS and WCPG.

GG commented that there was a lot of reference to external guidance and data. He raised concerns that this would be difficult for agents and landowners to navigate, even with FC signposting. He said the scheme should be as simple and linear as possible.

POr asked if supplements were “all or nothing”. **AR** responded that supplement would be assessed by compartment. **JW** added different payment rates within supplements was being discussed. **AR** continued that there was a balance to be struck between offering multiple payment rates and avoiding too much complexity.

Water quality /Riparian

ND asked what the evidence basis for the eligibility was and how they relate to delivering public good for public money. **MB** responded that they are based on advice from Forest Research from 2012 when EWGS introduced additional payments. He continued that the mapping was a combination of EA and FR data. **ND** said that it would be helpful to have more information about where these figures were coming from.

Social – urban proximity

GG stated that being within 3 miles of industrial town would be more disruptive to woodland creation than being within 1 kilometre of a rural village with a population of 2,000.

NE said that often woodland in very rural areas is heavily used, for example in the Lake District, and so the eligibility should be more nuanced. **GC** agreed, highlighted that often rural areas have higher instances of fly tipping.

JB highlighted that 84% of population live in urban areas and woodland creation needs to be focused on where it will be the most relevant to the most people. He questioned whether UKFS was appropriate for urban woodlands, stating that there are often completely different objectives and therefore requires completely different criteria. He argued that urban woodlands cannot simply be shoe-horned into existing criteria or added-on onto other grants. He emphasised the importance of consistent and regular funding and said that the FC should be taking responsibility for ensuring this. **JW** responded that UKFS is not too constraining for woodlands near towns but said he understood that schemes needed to work for woodland creation in urban and peri-urban areas.

JD agreed with **JB**, highlighting her experience with the Woodland Trust regarding the high cost of maintaining urban woodland, stating that a whole different category of incentive is needed.

Social – recreational access

NE highlighted that the Priority Places data does not pick up on highly used rural areas. **GC** asked if there could be flexibility to create new right of way even if there is already a Right of Way. He continued that permissive access would probably be more popular as the landowner has control. **AR** responded that additionality needs to be considered however the FC could look into enhancing existing access.

JB stated that the frequency of tree safety inspections, and subsequently the cost, are heavily dependent on levels of use. He continued that this is hard to measure, and certainly not easily measurable by area.

GG asked for the rationale behind why permissive access obligations would run longer than maintenance payments. He highlighted that for private landowners, 35 years is a long and potentially multi-generational commitment. He suggested that the obligation and payment periods could be better aligned. **AA** agreed that the obligation period seemed too long.

JR asked if a maintenance grant could help with the ongoing costs of managing public access to new woodlands to address the time period discrepancy.

JO agreed with **GG** that public access is one of the biggest blockers for people to plant trees, so payments need to be either higher or for a longer period. He also flagged that public access depreciates land value on the open market so funding for cost forgone would help incentivise.

Air Quality

DL said that there could be a lot of overlap between locations that benefit air quality and locations eligible for social and recreational access, he asked if there was a risk of conflict. **AR** responded that they are separate supplements to create a framework for private finance to come in and swap out the supplement in the future.

General comments

GG asked why the minimum stocking density for natural colonisation was 500 stems per hectare and asked why there were capital costs for planting at all. **AR** replied that the FC would need to have confidence that woodlands in natural colonisation schemes would achieve a reasonable stocking density. He continued that woodland would need to be established in time to realise benefits. He agreed that more work was needed.

NE said that natural colonisation is not the right mechanism for some supplements as the public would need reassurance and certainty that the scheme would work and work quickly for outcomes such as natural flood management. **CA** agree, citing research from BIFoR.

JD raised concerns that there was not sufficient streamlining with WCPG, saying that EWCG feels disconnected from WCPG.

JR said the proposals seem to too much historic splitting out of different “types” of woodland and do not reflect more contemporary approaches of ecosystem services and delivering public goods. He said that at the very least, the supplements should be framed as priority objectives which woodlands can be designed to satisfy as all woodlands will deliver some of degree of most of the supplement without much design effort.

ND commented that there is a lot of information and he would like to see more on how this has been derived and what the evidential basis was. He raised concerns that there was not enough stakeholder consultation going to the grant design and that the scheme could produce schemes with the bare minimum UKFS compliance.

SR agreed that the FC needs to better articulate how this scheme will work in practice and how it will work with WCPG in a new offer. She suggested presenting example to demonstrate the scheme.

JR said the binary portrayal of woodland needs to be avoided as it is damaging to the sector, asking if EWCG could have a system whereby scoring is used to assess the benefits of a scheme which are then rewarded by supplements. **JW** said that this was idea with EWCG; applicants would submit an application form and then the FC would score all the blocks to determine what benefits they deliver and what supplements should be funded.

JO asked if carbon was not to be included at the Woodland Carbon Guarantee is separate. He continued that this was too binary. **AR** replied that this was the case, although acknowledged that feedback suggests the WCaG is difficult for smaller woodlands to access. **JO** commented that shelterbelt provide carbon benefits however would be ineligible for [carbon] funding. **JW** said that it is likely that carbon would be scored but not funded.

JD noted that many of the eligibility considerations should be considered at planning stage not at creation stage.

JB said he would like to see an urban grant scheme, not just peri-urban, with specific and long-term funding for urban woodlands.

AOB

NE expressed concerns that there was not a representative for private forestry on the Planting on Private Land Project Board.

Meeting closed.