

Ref: AFG 3/2021

AFG minutes: 18th March 2021**Location:** Webinar / teleconference**Chair:** Joe Watts**Prepared by:** Harriette Dulake**Attendees****AFG members:**

Alisha Anstee (NFU) **AA**
Brian Fraser (HTA) **BF**
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**
Neil Douglas (RSPB) **ND**
Neville Elstone (ICF) **NE**
Nick Phillips (Woodland Trust) **NP**
Paul Orsi (Sylva) **POr**
Thomas Lancaster (RSPB) **TL**

FC/Defra Group:

Adrian Jowitt (Natural England) **AJ**
Alec Rhodes (FC) **AR**
Angharad Morgan (Defra) **AM**
Claire Douglas (RPA) **CD**
Harriette Dulake (FC) **HD**
Stephanie Rhodes (FC) **SR**

Hugh Williams (FC) **HW**
Joe Watts (FC) **JW**
Mark Broadmeadow (FC) **MB**
Penny Oliver (FC) **POI**
Rachel Sparks (FC) **RS**

Apologies

Adrian Sherwood (RPA)
Andy Shirley-Priest (RFS)
John Blessington (Local Government)

Julian Ohlsen (SW AFG)
Stan Abbott (WT)

AFG Minutes

Welcome

JW welcomed the group.

English Woodland Creation Offer - Regulations

EC asked the group if the proposed Land Information Search (LIS) format would benefit users and what additional datasets should be included.

POr responded that the LIS report looked good and was a welcomed improvement. He highlighted that the biggest issue currently is that different data sits with different organisations and can be frustrating for people to access. He asked if it would be possible for shape files to be uploaded directly to Magic for constraints checks. **EC** replied that he hoped this can developed.

JD said it looked straight-forward to use. She noted that sink and SHINE data is difficult to access. **EC** agreed, explaining that these are bespoke datasets for specific CS options that do not align with forestry activity. He continued that there were some challenges with HER data. **JD** responded that sink data would be valuable to the forestry sector, explaining that it is available in North Yorkshire in pdf form, but it is not consistent across England.

ND asked if the Woodlands Priority Habitats layers would link to the supplement eligibility in EWCG. He requested that more explanation is provide on how the datasets are derived and how they will be applied. Seeing more of evidential basis, needs bit more explaining on how it will apply and how it is derived. **JW** responded that there is ongoing work and development in some data layers that will support grant delivery and that there will be increased transparency on the mythologies that feed into data layers. **EC** said that there was ongoing work and development in some data layers that will support grant delivery. He added that the Low-Risk Map is being updated and some older layers are being replaced with more recent evidence data. **ND** raised concerns that the ground surveys still need to happen regularly to ensure that most recent evidence is available.

Proposed EIA and Woodland Creation Guidance

POr noted the importance of EIA documentation and how it can often be a blocker to projects coming forward. He raised concerns about the tight timescales for the new documentation to be finalised. He also queried whether other organisations were sufficiently resources to handle enquiries. **EC** responded that the documentation was

being built around statutory requirements and internal business processes were being developed alongside. He asked the Group for their thoughts on stakeholder capacity, particularly for eNGOs. He assured the Group that synergy across all forestry projects was a priority, although did say that some areas of work would take longer to deliver. **JW** continued that it was the aspiration to have everything in place for the EWCO launch however the work would be ongoing.

ND said that there was not sufficient time to properly review the documents and asked if more people from LINK could be given the chance to input. He flagged that there was not resource to input into every forestry project EIA decision and that statutory regulators should take responsibility and follow advice, highlighting that eNGOs so not charge for opinions and so an increase in forestry proposals would be a big undertaking. He continued by emphasising that the cumulative effect of forestry projects needed to be taken into consideration, flagging that the five-year time limit and the 500-metre boundary did not go far enough, particularly for bird populations, and often there is not readily available datasets to inform decisions. **EC** replied that the documentation should signpost project proposers towards the right professionals to ask for opinions and noted that the Woodland Creation Planning Grant further enhanced this. He agreed that the references to eNGOs should be more nuanced and should encourage proposers to gather evidence first and only ask for an opinion if required. He also noted that it was difficult to account for adjacent projects as until trees are planted and established, they cannot be considered as a cumulative effect.

NP agreed that more time to properly review would be helpful. He asked if biodiversity net gain would be included in the documentation for forestry EIAs, stating that planning net gain is assessed through the Town and Country Planning Act and if a decision has been made then it would need to be ensured that there was no dual handling. **EC** replied that where net gain is voluntarily proposed, with no regulatory underpinning, then there would be a role of our EIA regulations to step in.

ACTION: Regulations Team to set up further workshop to discuss EIA documentation in more depth.

ACTION: EWCO Team to set up further workshop to discuss Woodland Creation Guidance in more depth.

England Woodland Creation Grant (EWCG) update

GG asked why the rate for forest craftsperson time was £89.28 when EWGS paid £150. **AR** responded that the figure came from government statistics based on average salaries. **GG** suggested that the supplement to plant difficult sites might need more

thought as the opportunity costs would most likely be less as it would not be as valuable as farmland.

NE asked if lethal control of deer and squirrels would be funded. **AR** responded that the grant aimed to support lethal control through other capital items and maintenance payments. **NE** suggested looking at older CS agreements where revenue payments were included in the maintenance. He also asked if EWCG was essentially acting as a pilot for Environmental Land Management and raised concerns that deer management was not being considered fully.

JD asked how long the planting period would be. **AR** replied that the current intention is two years, but the FC were still considering the budgetary management aspect. He said it was likely that two years would be the default, but amendments may be considered.

ND raised concerns that the principle of public money for public good was not being considered enough and that the Nature for Climate Fund (NCF) should focus primarily on enhanced biodiversity, not just the minimum standards in the UKFS. He asked if supplements would be paid across schemes or at compartment level. **AR** responded that supplements are determined at compartment level. **SR** noted that the current plan is for EWCG to support a third of planting under the NCF.

NP said it was good to see progress but noted he was concerned that supplements with more flexible eligibility might be chosen over biodiversity. He suggested that the eligibility for air quality and natural flood management supplements could be raised to be in line with biodiversity. **JW** responded that the supplements were stackable so this should incentivise biodiversity outcomes. **NP** continued that the grant should be asking for above the bare minimum of UKFS compliance. **MB** highlighted that conifers play a greater role in flood risk management and so from that perspective have a greater public benefit, continuing that this was why the riparian planting was limited to native species only.

POr said it was good to see biodiversity split across two levels. He highlighted the importance of not setting the bar too high as it will act of as a blocker for potential applicants. He continued that the process should be about learning and starting to look at how benefits could be stacked as the science evolves. **SR** added that there would be a research and development programme for NCF shaped by the science advisory group to identify to where we need to improve evidential basis.

NE said he did not understand why the payment rate for water quality was significantly lower than the other supplement and asked why there was such a disparity. **RA** replied that the rate was derived from current evidence suggesting the monetised value that water quality brings to society. She continued that national estimates for recreation are

much higher, probably due to methodologies being used to measure non-market benefits. She explained that it is easier to monetised potential benefits versus hypothetical risk.

AA asked how the grant was able to offer a 100% intervention rate unlike CS. **JW** responded that the rationale between the 80% rate for CS was to give space for private finance for carbon. **MB** continued that it was originally one of the requirements in the Woodland Carbon Code however this has now been updated to reflect that the upfront capital costs are not the only costs of creating woodland.

GG said he felt that the grant did not fully commit to natural colonisation, saying that five years is not a long enough period for establishment. He suggested that the FC should look at instances where natural colonisation has been successful and then work backwards. **AR** agreed that it was a challenge, explaining that natural colonisation needs to be put in a timeframe that can justify a grant payment. **GG** said that the public benefits of biodiversity and water quality are realised as soon as farming stops. He said that there was a missed opportunity to use natural colonisation to extend ancient woodland. **AJ** agreed with **GG**, suggesting that a site check to evaluate the context could be done after five years but the FC should wait until after 10 years to see whether filling in is required. **ND** said more time and attention needed to be given to the issue. He raised concerns that natural colonisation was not limited to native species and that non-native projects could transition into adjacent open habitats. **AR** said that any form of tree could be eligible for natural colonisation support and that concern was be evaluated as part of the EIA. **SR** said that the FC were trying to strike a balance between creating an appealing offer and accounting for the inherent uncertainty concerning natural colonisation. She continued that there were several measures that could be taken to mitigate this, including a thorough initial assessment of site suitability and the use of reclaims. She highlighted that the FC only should be funding schemes that have a realistic chance of success. She also noted that evidence is becoming increasingly available, and this would inform future revisions of the offer.

JD asked if there were any pilots that the FC were monitoring the success of. **MB** response that between 1998 and 2003, WCS supporting natural regeneration with five-year inspections. He continued that Forest Research have mapped 270 projects, of which 68 have been looked at in details and will be assess soon to check what has been established and whether it is a woodland canopy or if supplementary planting is necessary.

AJ noted that Natural England are working with Defra to identify natural regeneration sites in order to monitor the progression and build datasets.

AR asked the group what interaction EWCG maintenance payments should have with BPS.

GG said that it should be kept simple, and BPS should come to an end after afforestation and the 15-year maintenance should start.

JD agreed, saying that BPS is often not claimed afterwards as the process is too complicated.

Urban Tree Challenge Fund (UTCf)

No comments.

Local Authority Treescapes Fund (LATF)

NP said it was great to see this fund and asked if it would pay for staff time or just capital funding for trees. He noted that the Woodland Trust have a similar scheme and suggested looking at interaction. **JK** responded that the scheme would fund the capital costs.

AOB

CA raised concerns about the Breeding Birds Survey brief and changes to its criteria, saying that the 1km buffer zone is impossible if the applicant is unable to get permission from neighbours. **JW** responded that the FC is developing new survey protocols with Natural England and they will be shared with the AFG as soon as they are ready.

ACTION: FC to share survey briefs with group for review.

NE said that it is difficult to see the interconnections between the different incentives in development and raised concerns that it appeared as though the FC and Defra were not working closely. He highlighted that plant health and WCPG do not seem to be linking into E.L.M. and that there needed to be more visibility. **SR** responded that the FC are working closely with the E.L.M. team to ensure a smooth transition. **NE** suggested that a sounding board be set up to talk through the incentives across all organisations.

ACTION: SR to feed this back to Defra and evaluate how to provide a space for this conversation.

Meeting closed.