

Ref: AFG 4/2021

AFG minutes: 29th April 2021**Location:** Webinar / teleconference**Chair:** Joe Watts**Prepared by:** Harriette Dulake**Attendees****AFG members:**

Alisha Anstee (NFU) **AA**
Andy Allen (WT) **AA**
Barnaby Coupe (Wildlife Trusts) **BC**
Caroline Ayre (Confor) **CA**
David Lewis (RICS) **DL**
Graham Garratt (ICF) **GG**

James Russell (Community Forests) **JR**
Julian Ohlsen (SW AFG)
Neil Douglas (RSPB) **ND**
Neville Elstone (ICF) **NE**
Paul Orsi (Sylva) **POr**
Stan Abbott (WT) **SA**

FC/Defra Group:

Adrian Jowitt (Natural England) **AJ**
Alec Rhodes (FC) **AR**
Angharad Morgan (Defra) **AM**
Claire Douglas (RPA) **CD**
Crispin Thorn (FC) **CT**
David Robertson (FC) **DR**
Hannah Dawson (FC) **HDa**

Harriette Dulake (FC) **HDu**
Hugh Williams (FC) **HW**
Joe Watts (FC) **JW**
Keith Jones (FC) **KJ**
Mark Broadmeadow (FC) **MB**
Neil Riddle (FC) **NR**
Penny Oliver (FC) **POI**

Apologies

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

Brian Fraser (HTA)
Graham Clark (CLA)
Jackie Dunne (Confor)

AFG Minutes

Welcome

JW welcomed the group and particularly Barnaby Coupe from the Wildlife Trusts to his first meeting.

WCPG – Survey Briefs

NR ran through slides.

JO thanked **NR** for the overview and clarification on the one-kilometre buffer. He highlighted that the more constraints that are put on people planting woodland, the fewer applications the FC will receive as there will be increased cost, time and risk versus benefit. He asked if the funding could be 70% of actual costs for survey work inside the holding and then 100% for survey work outside the holding. He also asked why the wading bird habitat layer on MAGIC was not being used. **NR** responded that this layer was created specifically for Mid-Tier Agri-Environment schemes and used British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Atlas data that is now about 10 years out of date. He continued that the new dataset would have ground truthing and therefore could give an accurate understanding of densities which is important for statutory consultations.

ND said the RSPB and LINK would like to be involved at an early stage and would welcome the chance to input further. He raised concerns data layers will replace ground surveys and so suggested there needed to be a further conversation on how these will work in practice. He also noted that areas for recovery should be identified as well.

JR said it needed to be made clear, not just to the sector, but also to FC staff that these surveys were just for use as part of the WCPG. He asked if there was potentially a risk of the surveys reading across into an EIA decision which could make it less attractive to landowners. **CT** responded that each FC Area Team now has an Area Ecologist to help consider sensitive areas and their role will be to provide specific technical advice to Woodland Officers in these cases.

NR highlighted that because the FC are procuring the surveys, it is important it is clear what it is expected. He said that the breeding bird survey aligns with industry best practice as set out by the RSPB, BTO and NE. He continued that WCPG is designed to help EIA process by ensuring that all the necessary information is available to enable a quick decision based on good evidence.

NE asked about the link between WCPG and E.L.M. **JW** responded that the woodland creation design plan from a WCPG can be used in any creation grant. **NE** asked if you

could apply for WCPG and CS if you are in the SFI pilot. **JW** replied that this has not been decided. **POI** added that it should be compatible as it is currently for creation grants. **MB** noted that if the EIA has started then the land is ineligible for WCPG.

Update on forestry and peat

MB ran through slides.

AA said that LNRS must be developed with land managers, noting that there are different levels of engagement with the land managing community across the pilots. She highlighted the importance of LNRS accurately representing what is on the ground, continuing that there should be an easy mechanism to challenge and amend the content if necessary. **MB** agreed but noted that they need to be referenced in the policy and that they can be useful in prioritising funding.

NE said that there are issues with LNRS concerning the aims and linkages to broader 25 Year Environment Plan outcomes.

BC highlighted it is not just peat and woodland that can be valuable habitats and asked if there was an ambition to include heathland and improved grassland in the same category. **MB** responded that this was currently not the ambition, noting that peat has the additional complexities of habitats below ground.

BC said that the LNRS' should properly map the opportunities for nature recovery, stating it was critical that woodland is not created on land where there is potential for recovery. **NR** added that the LNRS Habitat Map will have legal status and whilst the LNRS Recovery Map is not mandatory it will strongly influence agri-environmental funding, biodiversity net gain and other mechanisms.

GG said that habitat opportunity mapping is not binary, and land may have potential for several habitat types.

ND agreed with **BC**, saying that all habitats that represent nature-based solutions should be recognised, especially for value for wildlife and carbon storage. He asked if the guidance was finalised or still in development. **MB** replied that the guidance was an interim measure and that there are still some decisions to be made in collaboration with Natural England.

AJ added that he wanted to reassure the group that Natural England are keen to see lots of woodland creation in the right places.

EWCO - payments

DL said that loss of agricultural income is still a big issue and the uncertainty around E.L.M. and carbon payments mean that whilst farmers may be motivated by the capital costs, it is hard to predict whether they will be persuaded.

GG raised concerns with how the payment rate for labour was calculated.

NE raised concerns that lethal control for deer was not included. He also said that the rates for flood risk mitigation were too low, continuing that if this was due to lack of research then this should be commissioned as a priority. **CA** added that grey squirrel control should be included.

JO noted that the National Forest Tender Scheme was paying around £16k per hectare which is still a lot higher than what EWCO will offer. He also noted that it is valuable land that is best for tree planting so income forgone will be a bigger factor, meaning the scheme is unlikely to attract the high level of applications needed to meet government targets.

JR said that using capital costs seems irrelevant and that the principle of public money for public goods should mean that the funding should recognise the phenomenal public benefits of woodland creation.

ND said he was concerned about the alignment with E.L.M. and asked if the capital costs would be reflected in the Defra payments strategy. He also requested further information on how the rates have been calculated.

MB said that if the mapping was more highly targeted then the payment rates could go further, however rates are based on broad landscape benefits; the benefit is less but spread over a wider area.

RA responded that the supplements are trying to cover the future income forgone. She continued that, with regard to flood risk mitigation, there is a lack of data and inconsistent methodologies across different regions. She explained that the FC were using data from ONS, NE and the EA and plan to revise the rates as appropriate. She also noted that treasury requirements make it more difficult to reward public benefit so the combination of capital costs and supplements in EWCO is as far as the FC can go.

AR said that the problem with funding lethal control of deer is that the works would have to continue beyond the time frame of a grant agreement. He noted that the FC are looking into funding deer impact assessments through Supplementary Payments in

WCPG. **JW** continued that the maintenance payments for 10 years can contribute to deer management.

RA reassured the group that EWCO payment rates are aligned with E.L.M as well as biodiversity net gain. She also noted that whilst the average payment will be around £11k per hectare, there is the potential for this to increase to around £16k. She continued that the FC are keen for high value proposals to come forward as they will be offering the most public benefit.

DL noted that the maintenance payments were not as high as the income would be from arable land or improved grassland, although he continued that carbon payment could top this up.

JR said that it was not clear what the grant landscape would look like in the future and so landowners may not want to commit to woodland creation as there is uncertainty about what funding will be available after the maintenance period ends. He highlighted the importance of clarity on E.L.M.

POr said that was good to see increased rates and supplements but agreed with **NE** that deer management should be included.

EWCO – scoring

ND said he would be interested to see how the examples relate to UKFS when broken down. He asked if the scoring system was competitive and whether that meant there was a risk of smaller biodiversity-led schemes being rejected in favour of big commercial schemes. **AR** responded that all schemes would need to be UKFS compliant to be eligible for EWCO and applicants will need to go further to access additional funding through the supplements. He continued that if the budget were to become constrained then the grant would have to become competitive. He reassured the group that there are opportunities for smaller schemes to score highly. **JW** continued that there is flexibility, and this can be reviewed if the grant is oversubscribed.

PO asked if it were just tree species that would be scored or would genetics be considered. **AR** it was something that could be looked at in the future.

EWCO - Natural Colonisation

GG asked if the 112 trees requirement was an absolute or whether the Woodland Officer could make a decision on their own discretion. He also asked what 60% woody cover meant.

BC asked whether this was linked up with the ongoing work by NE on natural colonisation over the last 50 years, saying that using this was crucial in underpinning guidance and payments (for example nitrate pollution). He highlighted the importance of successful delivery as there are already sceptics.

MB responded that the ambition is to make guidance available at the same time. He continued that the guidance would be based on work done by Forest Research and emerging evidence from WGS MKIII.

AR said that a monitoring and assessment regime is being developed. He continued that from a grant perspective, a consistent approach would mean that Woodland Officers and applicants can easily understand the expectations.

ACTION: AR to share monitoring requirements with the Group once finalised.

AOB

HDa gave a brief update on the Tree Health Pilot ahead of a full update in the next meeting.

Meeting closed.