

Ref: AFG 7/2021

AFG Minutes: 15 July 2021**Location:** Webinar/teleconference**Chair:** Joe Watts and Penny Oliver**Secretary:** Samanta Raymundo**Attendees****AFG Members:**

Adrian Jowitt (Natural England) **AJ**
Alisha Anstee (NFU) **AA**
Andrew Allen (Woodland Trust) **AAI**
Andy Shirley-Priest (RFS) **ASP**
Barnaby Coupe (Wildlife Trusts) **BC**
Brian Fraser (HTA) **BF**
Caroline Ayre (Confor) **CA**

David Lewis (RICS) **DL**
Graham Garratt (ICF) **GG**
Jackie Dunne (Confor) **JD**
James Russell (Marston Vale) **JR**
Paul Orsi (Sylva) **PO**
Rory Lunny (Defra) **RL**

FC/Defra:

Alec Rhodes (FC) **AR**
Angharad Morgan (Defra) **AM**
Danielle Standish (FC) **DS**
Emily Voss (FC) **EV**
Ewan Calcott (FC) **EC**
Joe Watts (FC) **JW**
Melanie Edgar (FC) **ME**

Penny Oliver (FC) **POI**
Rosa Amboage (FC) **RA**
Sam Pollock (FC) **SP**
Samanta Raymundo (FC) **SRa**
Sharon Rose (FC) **SRO**
Yvonne Wood (FC) **YW**

Apologies:

Adrian Sherwood (RPA)
Graham Clark (CLA)
John Blessington (Local Government)

Neil Douglas (RSPB)
Stan Abbott (WT)

AFG Minutes

Welcome

JW welcomed the group and notified that **POI** will be stepping in as chair from 3.30pm.

JW gave an overview of what will be covered in AOB.

Peat Guidance

EC ran through slides on peat guidance.

POr asked what the Natural England Peat Map is based on and whether it uses the UK soil observatory base map. **EC** responded that the deep peat element starts at 30 cm but he is unsure whether it is linked to NSRI data. **EC** to find out and let **POr** know the outcome.

Forest Regulations Update

EC ran through slides on forest regulations update.

JW expressed that it is good that LIS will be released at the end of August and the EIA in the next few weeks and queried whether an eAlert is planned or whether the FC will inform the AFG of the release. **EC** confirmed there will be an eAlert but the AFG can be informed of specific dates in advance.

Agent Authority Update

JW welcomed **SRO** to the meeting.

SRO ran through slides on Agent Authority updates.

GG stated that he was not aware that there was a 2019 version and that all his clients are set up on the 2015 version. He continued that he had recently had a felling licence rejected and was informed that the 2015 version was not valid. He said that he was about to replace all 2015 forms to the 2019 version and asked that the admin hubs be informed that the 2015 version is still valid to avoid confusion. He continued that the forms have provision for WCOs, but the 2015 form talks about 'grants'. He queried whether specific schemes need to be listed.

SRo replied that the new form lists 'live grants' which previously were not listed. She continued that the 2021 form is more specific and lists all live grants, in addition to having the functionality to select 'all future grants' to future proof the form.

GG stated that repeatedly asking signatories to fill in different forms can be frustrating and antagonistic. He continued that making the form specific does not necessarily future proof the form.

SRo replied that the 2021 form has split out legacy grants, regs and live grants (i.e., non-RDPE grants). **SRo** stated that the 2021 form is still a work in progress and will take away GG's comments.

GG said that he is empowered by landowners to do certain things and the forms should therefore be robust. **GG** expressed that it would be useful for later forms to empower agents across government bodies.

SRo responded that some grants do not require SBI numbers and it is therefore not possible to check and authorise agent authority on Rural Payments.

ASP agreed with **GG** and added that clients are unhappy with delays caused by agent authority forms and reflects poorly on agents.

POr highlighted that admin hubs are not aware that 2015 forms are still valid. He continued to state that an agent he was recently working with on an estate in the North of England had been informed that his 2015 form was out of date. **POr** suggested that the client should be linked through the Rural Payment set up but acknowledged that this may be beyond the scope of this issue.

SRo suggested that issues arising from the 2015 form may be due to it including the CS Woodland Management Plan but stated that she would contact admin hubs and investigate.

GG stated that he had a 2015 agent form rejected for online felling licence for a client but had other felling licences sent off without a problem.

SRo responded that she would investigate the 2015 agent authority form issue with admin hubs.

ACTION: SRo to investigate issues with 2015 agent authority forms and feed back to AFG.

JW asked the group whether moving towards Qualified Electronic Signatures (QES) was a positive step forward.

DL highlighted the need for using both QES and wet signatures to accommodate traditional land-owning clients. He stated that sometimes paper is easier but provided both remain an option the inclusion of QES is welcomed.

AOB – Material Shortages

JW informed the group that the AFG meeting was running ahead of schedule and invited **POI** to speak on material shortages.

POI informed the group that a recent Countryside Stewardship (CS) case had identified a shortage of fencing materials. **POI** asked the group whether this was a wider issue and welcomed feedback.

ASP highlighted that there are problems with plant stocks and technology equipment, but general material shortages are not an issue.

BF and **GG** agreed with **ASP** regarding plant stocks and added that spiral guards and canes are becoming an issue. **BF** added that there is a plastic shortage and the prices for tree protection are rising.

GG added that fencing is not currently a concern but anticipates it will be in the future.

POI thanked the group and requested that FC remain informed of any other cases of material shortages.

Agroforestry

ME presented slides on agroforestry.

ME asked the group whether they were aware of activities concerning shelterbelts, silvoarable and silvopastural.

ASP responded that he had been involved in work concerning shelterbelts and silvopastural with parklands but had little experience with silvoarable work. He added that shelterbelts are often included around houses and for livestock.

DL agreed with **ASP** and added that there is a lot of interest in developing agroforestry, particularly silvoarable and silvopastural, from organisations such as the Soil Association and the Woodland Trust. He continued that there are interested parties but suspects that

some of the systems are not well known amongst farmers, landowners and advisors. He highlighted that knowledge regarding shelterbelts is more widespread as it is akin to conventional forestry and stated that he knew of individuals pioneering smaller shelterbelts comparable to hedgerows. He highlighted the difficulties in finding good, reliable data on silvopastoral and silvoarable practices, and said he would be interested to see whether the FC and other group members had data on the subject.

AA stated that agroforestry is big topic in the Woodland Trust and that they work with lots of farmers promoting silvoarable and silvopastoral practices. He highlighted that the shortage of advice is a barrier. He queried whether agroforestry regulations sat within UKFS or Farming and Forestry and stated that it impacts the ability to sell these systems to farmers. He offered to work with the FC further on agroforestry and introduce **ME** to key contacts.

ASP agreed with **DL** and reiterated that finding reliable information is difficult and that there is more interest in agroforestry now.

GG stated he is contacting landowners and managers regarding their views on management, afforestation, rewilding and the development of farmland as part of his ongoing studies. He said he would share his findings with the group.

POr welcomed agroforestry but queried the regulatory aspect. He stated that the Farm Woodland Forum has pulled information together following fieldtrips and that organisations such as the Woodland Trust, Soil Association and Organic Research Centre have run trials in agroforestry.

RL signposted the group to policy from the Farm Woodland Forum for more information. He noted that research networks in the 1980s and 1990s had collected data and shown the benefits. He stated that the trials from organisations noted above should be incorporated.

ME asked the group how much potential is there for shelterbelts, silvoarable and silvopastoral activities if they are incentivised with the right support.

DL replied that there is a lot of interest, particularly from the Organic Research Centre, the Woodland Trust and the Soil Association. He noted that how it correlates to take up is dependent on incentives, availability of professional advice, publications and the regulations. He suggested that there is potential for these activities, but that it will require a lot of work.

ME asked the group which system they thought would be most popular.

ASP replied that shelterbelts and silvopastural systems will be popular as clients look to reinstating parklands. He commented that easing administrative pressures and incentives would help the uptake. He continued that small areas would take advantage of shelterbelts but that silvoarable systems would require more technical support.

POr agreed with **ASP**. **POr** stated that shelterbelts and silvopastural systems compliment the current landscape. He highlighted that silvoarable systems are a challenge to farmers due to current machinery and that regulations must be explored before it is an appealing option. He continued that the NFU's tree strategy highlighted the permanency of planting trees which is a concern for farmers.

BC stated that silvopastural is the most popular system due to the need to offset livestock and greenhouse gas emissions. He suggested that silvoarable systems may become more popular with the innovation towards more exacting technology. He highlighted that a move away from big machinery towards robotics would make silvoarable systems more appealing.

AJ said that following discussions with individuals in the industry, silvopastural systems are the easiest options and a good route into trees. He highlighted that a lot of family farms do not make decisions solely based on economics and that many still wish to farm. He continued that concerning silvoarable, people are concerned about croppings and spacings that have been built around a specific boom width.

JW replied that regarding alley cropping, there may be restrictions on the lines of trees which may disincentivise landowners.

RL stated that there is a big market for silvopastural but that silvoarable practices are more aligned with the 'right tree in the right place' principle. He continued that there are specific areas which may be suitable such as Norfolk and Cambridgeshire and that Cranfield University have sites around Bedford. He suggested that locations for silvoarable practices would need to be targeted.

ASP reiterated **POr's** note on the permanency of trees and stated that it had been a barrier for some plantations. He queried whether practices such as growing poplars and later reinstating to agricultural land would work for silvoarable systems.

ME asked whether advisor support would be needed to implement the actions, and if so, would the group expect that support to come from the FC or from another source.

ASP replied that it would be dependent on the application process and the ease of entering the scheme. Noted that the time taken to get onto small scale schemes may be a deterrent.

DL stated that it would be dependent on the motivations of each option. He noted that because each system is different there may be issues finding the right advisor, suggesting that the existing network be used with specialists brought in as required.

GG wished to reiterate the note on permanency of trees. He suggested that agroforestry systems may be the right choice in many cases but if future generations wish to make converting land to woodland more appealing they can incentivise. He continued to give an example of allowing agricultural land develop naturally alongside grazing and the concerns arising from tax benefits.

POr stated that it would be difficult for farmers to accept advice from the FC unless the individual was an agroforestry expert. He continued that agroforestry should be promoted as good for farms and for the land, with an emphasis on the benefit to farming.

BC replied that the advice should be holistic and combine both farming and woodland advice. He continued that the Landscape Recovery (LR) and the Local Nature Recovery (LNR) Schemes were not mentioned but would be possible routes for agroforestry.

AA said that in terms of advice and regulations farmers will want farm advice. He continued that farmers would look to farm advisors with specialist knowledge and that agroforestry is a gateway to trees. He highlighted the need to address the misconception that converting farmland to woodland is a devaluation.

AJ said that the encouraging new schemes should be proactive.

RL stated that good agroforestry advice and guidance is crucial and highlighted that it is a route to market. He suggested promoting timber, carbon, biodiversity benefits so farmers understand what they are growing.

ME responded that although LNR and LR are not included, they were exploring which scheme would be best suited to delivery agroforestry. They continued that SFI would not have specific prioritization and advice on agroforestry in its pilot stages. They asked the group what type of scheme agroforestry would best fit under and continued to ask what the scheme would have to offer.

AA replied that the Woodland Trust see SFI as a scheme all farmers can apply for and therefore suggested agroforestry be included in SFI. He continued that an agroforestry

standard when the full scheme roles out will be needed. He said that EWCO in financial terms is viewed as a stop gap before ELM which should include agroforestry. He suggested that lessons learnt from EWCO should inform the roll out of SFI.

BC suggested that there should be elements of each system across the schemes. He highlighted the importance of including agroforestry in SFI, particularly for systems such as shelterbelts and riparian planting. He continued that it should be explored how silvoarable and silvopastural systems integrate across whole landscapes and suggested that the roll out be scaled up through the development of grants.

POr queried whether including agroforestry in EWCO would be sensible given the size and duration of the scheme. He stated that trying to include it in EWCO may not be the best use of resources. He continued that there is an agroforestry incentive in Scotland and suggested speaking forestry contacts in Scotland to see how it has been received.

ME confirmed that FC are in discussions with other organisations including those in Scotland.

RL replied that there have been issues in agroforestry schemes across devolved nations such as a payment rate issue with the Northern Ireland scheme. He highlighted that if agroforestry schemes are introduced landowners must be given an opportunity between now and the start of ELM to provide continuity.

JW questioned how well-developed proposals for agroforestry are in terms of the challenge/innovation fund.

AA noted that in terms of innovation that agroforestry is practiced widely in Europe but there is no tradition of it in the UK. He highlighted the importance of rediscovering how to include it in the wider landscape and the importance of promotion.

JR said that if innovation is required it is more technical rather than cultural. He continued that a lot of research has been done on agroforestry for over twenty years and noted Dr Paul Burgess' work at Cranfield University. He suggested that the FC have sight of those projects.

RL added that he has spoken to Dr Paul Burgess who has been looking at carbon and agroforestry modelling with the agro-climate team and had been involved in tree health studies with Defra. He continued that local authorities have been looking into the barriers landowners face when going into agroforestry and what can be done to make agroforestry systems more appealing. He suggested that this ongoing work should feed into ELM.

ME asked the group whether any members currently practicing or interested in practicing agroforestry systems who would be interested in codesigning on a short-term basis. **ME** shared their email in the chat.

ACTION: AFG members to contact ME to get involved with agroforestry codesign.

ME said that it would be a short-term involvement looking at the barriers and challenges that are currently preventing people using agroforestry systems. They continued that there may be longer term involvement but welcomed any short-term volunteers.

BC asked how many people will be involved and continued that there may be people in the Wildlife Trust who could help.

ME confirmed that it would be a relatively small (20+) focused group and that they would like to use the AFG to identify stakeholders. They continued that agroforestry is not a new practice, but it is novel and that it would be useful to talk to more people about agroforestry schemes, regardless of whether it is a whole codesign group.

JW queried whether this was looking at agroforestry across all schemes.

ME said that they were looking to design a full agroforestry offer and identify which schemes would work.

AA said he would share his discussions with NFU regarding barriers to agroforestry with **ME**. He queried whether the AFG would hear about SFI developments.

ME stated that work would be done internally for potentially EWCO development and other standards for agroforestry, but that the contacts would be passed onto Defra to form a formal agro-design group for SFI. They confirmed that the AFG would be informed of any progress.

A guide to planning new woodland in England

SP presented the slides and asked the group whether the guide should be printed or whether it could remain online only.

ASP replied that he does print them off but highlighted the difficulties with navigating gov.uk if it is only available online. He suggested that signposting the latest information online would be useful.

SP highlighted the issues with ensuring documents are up to date if printed.

ASP responded that including the date on any print runs would be useful so users know whether it is the current guidance.

SP responded that a link to the updated documents and the guide would be included.

POr suggested that an abridged version be published including sections like the process, engaging with stakeholders and reviewing the land. He suggested that no links be included in the printed guide.

SP asked the group whether there were volunteers to review the guide. She continued that feedback on whether it suits the intended audience and whether any sections are missing would be appreciated. She said that a blank spreadsheet would be circulated to collate comments and feedback.

POr queried the timescale.

SP confirmed the end of the month (July 2021).

GG suggested to test the guide with live projects to assess whether it works.

SP asked whether WCPG repeat customers with a variety of sites could test the guide. She continued that getting everything to fit together for the guide has been a challenge, but they have been trying to work out proportionality.

GG suggested employing somebody to test the guide.

SP highlighted the importance of AFG member's opinions.

DL said that having a couple of examples would be helpful for proportionality and for advisors. He continued that this would also be helpful for EWCO.

SP replied that supplements including examples are on the list of further developments.

GG stated the benefits of not rushing the process to produce a more thorough guide.

SP thanked the group for their comments.

ACTION: AFG members to contact SP if they would like to volunteer feedback.

CS Rate Reviews

DS presented slides and asked the group to contact her to share their expertise. She confirmed that the timeline is the end of the month (July 2021).

POI confirmed that the timescale is steered by the need to communicate a programme modification to Europe by the end of August. She continued that this was part of a wider rate review for CS, but that the FCs interest is in woodland sites.

AOB – Management Plans

POr raised that the management plan guidance has incorrect links throughout. He continued that there is a focus on creation and that the NFUU strategy details bringing woodlands back into management. He continued that it would be useful to see an update if possible and offered to help.

EC responded that it is a capacity problem and that there is not currently the budget to bring anyone else on. He continued that once the Peat and GIS updates are completed there should be capacity to address the management plan issue. He said that he is aware that an in-depth review is required and that there is information in UKFS that can be incorporated. He continued that in 4-6 weeks he hopes to have it properly updated.

POr replied that he has a graduate forester with funding who would be willing to help the team if needed.

POI said that the AFG would have a break over August, but that this should be revisited in Autumn. She continued that woodland creation has been a focus but recognised the importance of revisiting management plans.

ASP highlighted the importance of up-to-date links.

BC said that **EC** had previously mentioned developing a customer map browser. **BC** queried whether this was to support woodland creation.

EC replied that there is already a map browser which generates a LIS report but continued that the system is not intuitive unless the user is familiar with it. He continued that they have been working on getting the right suite of data and making the system more intuitive.

BC queried how connected the mapping tools were to ELM. He continued that consistency would be useful.

EC replied that the FC browser is forestry specific and noted that not all datasets are necessary across all programmes. He continued that the data on the FC browser is continuously updated. He expressed his concern around other mapping tools which are being developed that do not cover essential features such as designated land and how these tools are being used with incomplete datasets.

AOB – Archaeology

EC asked the group whether they had any challenges with historic environment asset records and delays with proposal assessments. He continued that there is concern that historic environment records are slowing processes for obtaining felling licences, woodland creation agreements and EIA assessments.

AA asked **EC** whether he has contacted John Tucker.

EC replied that he has been in contact with John Tucker and will pick up specific concerns with him.

AA stated that due to resource constraints Local Authorities give standard responses which can slow processes, but to pick up the above point with John Tucker.

ACTION: EC to contact JT from WT. Include as a future agenda item with David Robertson.

AOB - EWCO and interaction with other grants

AR presented the slides.

POI said there are some transition case examples but that it would be useful to have more examples to understand. She asked the group whether there were any questions.

AR stated that the FC are currently in the process of managing Countryside Stewardship, WCF and HS2WF transitions into EWCO which requires coordination with the RPA. He continued that AFG feedback on timescales for putting forward transitional EWCO applications would be helpful.

ACTION: AR to email AFG members and request opinion on time frames.

END