

Ref: AFG 9/21

AFG Minutes: 16 September 2021**Location:** Webinar/teleconference**Chair:** Joe Watts**Secretary:** Samanta Raymundo**Attendees****AFG Members:**

Adrian Jowitt (Natural England) **AJ**
Andrew Allen (Woodland Trust) **AAI**
Andy Shirley-Priest (RFS) **ASP**
Barnaby Coupe (Wildlife Trusts) **BC**
Caroline Ayre (Confor) **CA**
Claire Douglas (RPA) **CD**
David Lewis (RICS) **DL**

Graham Clark (CLA) **GC**
Ian Baker (Small Woods) **IB**
John Blessington (Local Government) **JB**
Neil Douglas (RSPB) **ND**
Neville Elstone (Cumbria Woodlands) **NE**
Paul Orsi (Sylva) **POr**

FC/Defra:

Alec Rhodes (FC) **AR**
David Jam (FC) **DJ**
Emily Voss (FC) **EV**
Evelina Budriake (FC) **EB**
Hugh Loxton (Defra) **HL**
Joe Watts (FC) **JW**

Katy Moseley (FC) **KM**
Melanie Edgar (FC) **ME**
Penny Oliver (FC) **POI**
Rory Lunny (Defra) **RL**
Rosa Amboage (FC) **RA**
Samanta Raymundo (FC) **SR**

Apologies:

Adrian Sherwood (RPA)
Alisha Anstee (NFU)
Brian Fraser (HTA)
Graham Clark (CLA)

Graham Garratt (ICF)
Jackie Dunne (Confor)
James Russell (Marston Vale)
Stan Abbott (WT)

AFG Minutes

Welcome

JW opened the session and welcomed Ian Baker of Small Woods to his first AFG meeting.

JW informed the group that Alisha Anstee will no longer represent the AFG for the NFU and thanked her for her contribution to the group over the past few years. AOB would be taken first to allow the presenters to fit with other meeting commitments.

AOB – CS/ES and EWCO

POI raised the topic of taking land out of ES agreements to transfer into EWCO and highlighted that this is already possible for CS WCG. She continued that work had been undertaken with Defra, the RPA and NE and that she hoped to share an update with the group today, but no final decision had been made yet. **POI** informed the group that specific customers will be contacted when the decision is finalised and that there will be an eAlert to share with the group.

NE queried whether the change would impact a broad range of people.

POI confirmed that it would.

AOB – Economic calculator

RA said past AFG meetings, webinars and feedback from stakeholders had highlighted the need for an easy-to-use toolkit to explore potential woodland creation cashflow. She continued that this toolkit would be an indicator of potential costs and benefits, with users able to select specific or generic time frames to explore topics such as cashflow from timber and carbon, additionality and public benefits. She requested that AFG members get in touch if they are willing to volunteer for Beta testing.

CA queried how the toolkit will be communicated to stakeholders.

RA replied that it has not yet been decided but that it will be made widely available, potentially via a website. Training for using the toolkit is planned.

NE stated in the chat that he would be keen to get one of his team involved.

ACTION: AFG members to email RA if they are interested in Beta testing the toolkit.

CS Woodland Improvement Supplements

EB presented slides.

NE queried whether all were subject to a standard costs revision.

EB stated that the WD2 payment rate is not subject to a payment review. She continued that they are working on rates but they are not in place yet.

POI said that there was a review of CS rates, capital and revenue but that WD2 was not put forward for review. She said that the approach is to develop supplements in response to feedback and to reward additional activity. She stated that WD1 is currently under review, and that the review of CS capital rates is starting now. **POI** continued that revised rates are to come into place from next year, usually in February when it opens for capitals.

NE asked whether the sector have been engaged in the capital review process.

POI replied that Defra are leading and that a lot of the standard costs are not related to trees. She continued that they are planning to engage with stakeholder groups and that the AFG need to be included.

ND queried why it is 80% native species for PAWS restoration rather than 100%.

EB replied that they have looked at the payments under WG1 and that the provision is led by ETAP. She continued that whatever is outlined in ETAP will affect WS2.

POI stated that this may link into the Keepers of Time review which will be covered later in the session.

HL said in the chat that 80% native species is also aligned to how native woodland is defined in the National Forest Inventory.

POI asked for input from the AFG on WS3.

IB stated that most small woodland owners have woods of 3 ha or below. He continued that if the aspiration is to attract small woodland owners 3 ha is still too large. He stated that many owners of woodlands below 3 ha are still profitable and stressed the need for a lower threshold. He continued that the need for alignment may restrict the threshold.

POI replied that they are keen to address small woodlands in the future and that under the SFI the existing woodland standard is 0.5 ha. She continued that they anticipate this will lead into LNR and that it has been aligned slightly above entry level.

IB responded that Small Woods and the Royal Forestry Society had met with the minister to stress their disappointment regarding the focus of the SFI pilot [on just farmers].

DL said that it is great to see a small woodland supplement. He continued that small woodland owners have difficulty initially preparing a woodland plan, particularly if advice is needed. He continued that including money for smaller woodland and woodland creation schemes was raised in relation to EWCO and that there is currently no funding for smaller plans. **DL** requested clarity on the supplement and queried whether 9 ha of wood would have the same criteria as existing woodland. He continued that most woodlands that are eligible are designated native woodlands with SSSIs.

EB responded that there is a review of capital items, with WS3 addressing up to 10 ha, and BA3 over 10 ha. She said that customers close to the line will be accounted for so people are not disadvantaged by the scheme. She stated that in terms of scoring, if WD2 is applied for priority areas there may be a risk, but WS3 will bring a bonus supplement to boost score.

DL said that even for woodlands of 1 ha, putting together a plan is a large amount of work with no funding support. He stated that providing a supplement of £200 per ha for 5 years is still marginal to justify putting together an approved plan and that it only becomes viable with larger schemes.

JB stated that there is a lot of woodland under 3 ha continuing that they are often smaller, more vulnerable and many are unregistered ancient woodland. He queried whether individual blocks of woodland would need to be under the same ownership.

EB confirmed that the woodland has to be under the same ownership. She continued that different landowners applying together had been explored, but that it is not viable at this time.

JB responded many woodlands are subdivided into blocks under many ownerships with good relationships. He continued that it should be an option if integrated.

JW replied that the need for grants to work through collaboration is on the agenda for ELM.

GC agreed with **DL** and **JB** and stated that small woods under different ownership is a missed opportunity. He continued that the tree health pilot is bringing together different ownerships to respond to ash dieback.

JW responded that the tree health pilot can inform how joint applications can work which could be brought into a further revision.

ASP said it was great to see squirrel control but that the main factor is whether the payment rates are realistic. He stated that squirrel control is one of the most expensive things to do, but also one of the most crucial.

NE stated that EWCO is trialing payments for ecosystem services and queried whether this would link to 25-year environmental plans.

EB responded that CS is more limited in terms of funding and the need to fit under the RDPE framework. She continued that these are for established woodland, whereas EWCO is for woodland creation. She stated that this is in line with the ministerial steer.

JW stated that the payment route is more conventional but the objectives of the supplements are in line with the 25-year plan for improving woodland quality.

NE questioned why to opt for woodland creation when there is no payment in year 12. He continued that if sticking to income forgone and cost, the incentive to plant is not there unless it is productive.

JW highlighted that this is part of a wider discussion and the need to look to ELM.

ND said that there is concern for paying for effort in addition to capital items. He continued that he has not yet discussed proposals with his colleagues, but that this has raised concerns in the past.

GC stated the need to approach squirrel control in a multi-ownership way. He highlighted that this would be an ideal place for support for collaboration.

DJ agreed that collaborative action over deer and squirrels is needed and that this area of supplements is one way into ELM. He continued that there is bigger prizes in landscape recovery with ELM.

JB responded that in regard to public access, health and safety for mature woodlands is a much bigger cost than for young woodlands. He continued that this it would be good for this to be acknowledged, but recognised the difficulty with area payments.

ASP said that the flexibility FY2 provides for agents is a positive.

.

JW stated the FC's commitment to engaging with the AFG and welcomed any further responses to proposals.

JB welcomed the approach to veteran trees and highlighted the urgency as trees are growing at rates that have not been seen before and outgrowing their strength.

JW responded that extra support may link into making woodlands safe.

NE questioned whether scrub creation has been addressed.

EB said it has not.

POI stated that there are discussions occurring alongside NE managing existing woodland, transitional space, what's regulated and how we interact with it. She said that scrub creation and the definitions of woodland has started to come under the agroforestry conversation.

NE said that creation of new scrub is not included in the government tree counter. He continued that he has seen two cases where scrub creation is being proposed which generates risks regarding delivering objectives and reputational risk on the sector. He continued that how CS and EWCO relate is important and that open dialogue is needed.

ACTION: NE to contact POI regarding scrub creation.

DL said the supplements are good but suggest that support for ash felling bills should be considered. He also raised the barriers to entry and the concern for owners and agents regarding policing. He continued that owners are concerned about compliance (e.g., deer management, thinning, public access) and not meeting these requirements. He suggested that making things simpler and clearer would be helpful.

EB responded that they are striving for simplicity with these supplements, with straight-forward prescriptions. She continued that that inspection regime under domestic regulations is gentler and that work has been done with the RPA for a collaborative approach. She stated that where inspection penalties no longer apply, breaches will instead be rectified, with the approach becoming more collaborative than penalty based.

DL was encouraged by the joint effort and stated that having WOs to help with activities such as thinning targets is good to hear.

POI stated that in respect to ash dieback, the Tree Health Pilot will look at costs for felling ash trees.

POr said the continual use of codes in CS (e.g., WD, BE) is confusing and unless you are exposed to it everyday the terminology is difficult to follow. He encouraged that the names of supplements be used rather than acronyms.

EB welcomed **POr's** comment and stated that communications should be adapted with regards to acronyms.

JB stated that public safety costs for ash dieback will be in the billions and that this will need to be funded by other means.

JW noted **JB's** point and recognised the need for felling licence applications to become simpler.

EB thanked the AFG for their feedback.

EWCO Phase 2

AR presented the slides

NE stated in the chat 'Hi, I vote for deer control as an alternative'.

BC said that to date there is currently 345 ha, with a goal of 11,000 ha by 2023/24. He questioned where the figures currently are compared to the expectation and asked whether the proposals will address the shortfall.

AR responded that EWCO is one of the building blocks contributing to the overall aim. He continued that EWCO's aim for the first year is 1,500 ha and that applications are consistently being submitted, but the reporting needs to be developed to further understand these figures. He recognised that the uptake is healthy, but the opportunity for planting this year diminishes.

JW said the key point is the FC are pleased with the uptake and that there are annual targets, but the overall target of 10,800 by 2025 for the UK should be the aim. He continued that to hit larger targets the pipeline needs to be developed. He stated that some this year's applications will not be planted this year, and that the overall offer may need further refinement.

BC identified the figures quoted in the EWCO Grant Manual are incorrect.

AR responded that the Grant Manual would be updated to accurately reflect targets.

ND said that initial reporting should give insights on the types of schemes and the uptake of supplements. He queried whether the CS repayments issue has been a blocker for applications.

AR responded that reporting is being developed to explore the different components following IT issues. He continued that the type of trees and Additional Contributions will be included in the reporting. Regarding CS repayments, **AR** explained that they have been a blocker with 20% of CS schemes originating in ES. He continued that the process **POI** mentioned earlier in AOB will unlock those schemes and that land managers will have assurance that there will be no recovery on land in ES.

DL reiterated his previous point regarding smaller schemes, stating that relaxing the eligibility of WCPG from 5 ha to 1 ha for a smaller payment would help see smaller schemes come to fruition.

AR responded that this has been flagged before and developing a smaller scale offer is being explored. He continued that the main concern is capacity and how an increase in workload would be managed.

DL stated he appreciates the challenges this would cause.

GC questioned whether there is enough resource in house and whether recruitment was still underway.

JW replied that recruitment has been occurring, but the FC are still in the hiring process.

GC said that the woodland creation of smaller schemes of a few hectares is an indicator of where there is availability for woodlands. He continued that we can expect to see more small woodlands and that customers who may have had negative experiences with CS need to be reassured. He highlighted the need for applications to be turned around quickly.

ASP asked for one-year employment contracts to be less common. He highlighted the importance of continuity in staff for land agents.

JW responded that people are often recruited then moved onto a more senior role. He stated that the FC are recruiting on a longer-term basis.

IB agreed with **GC** and said that an increase in planting and woodland cover is not going to happen on big sites. He continued that if current approaches do not facilitate planting on smaller sites there must be an alternative available.

JW responded that a 'EWCO lite' could be explored to address this gap.

IB and **GC** replied in the chat in favour of a 'EWCO lite'.

NE stated his support for ground cultivation and continued that where it is appropriate it is a good technique of encouraging growth and reducing the need of herbicides.

JW said that if ground cultivation were to be included it would be in accordance with guidelines and only on soils where it is fully justified.

ND reiterated that asks were for EWCO to dedicate a greater proportion for biodiversity gain and nature approaches. He continued that cultivation would be to enable productive species and that they would want to see detail of the proposal. He also questioned whether reverse auctions proposals represented a transition to local Nature Recovery or Landscape Recovery schemes. He continued that more information on the AFG's involvement as a consultee in development of these schemes would be welcome.

NE stated in the chat 'We disagree here **ND**, ground prep can improve all 25-year outcomes, quick establishment should be embraced'.

AR responded that currently high-level ideas are currently being explored, but a shortlist of priorities would be drawn up in the coming months with input from the AFG.

JW replied that **ND** is correct in that large scale reverse auctions links to Landscape Recovery. He continued that it would be a useful opportunity to test how it would work for woodlands.

POr thanked **AR** for including My Forest and stated that he would be keen to work on integration. He continued that with respect to reverse auctions, he has a nature bid platform with the EA and would be happy to raise reverse auctions. He stated that a water supply supplement would be useful and stated that fencing off water areas, where to put water supply and when to pay are issues he faced as a land manager. **POr** welcomed the suggestion of direct seeding and highlighted the accelerated benefits of direct wildflower seeding versus than arable growth.

ASP stated that cultivation is used to aid establishment which is vital for amenity and productive environmental planting.

CA welcomed feedback from WOs, applicants, and those who want to plant multi-benefit mixed woodland. She expressed support for most suggestions, particularly an Additional Contribution for timber and nature recovery, highlighting the Stourhead case study.

ND expressed concern that the slides represent a dilution of the proportion of schemes for nature-based approaches. He continued that he would reserve judgement until a picture of the types of schemes progressing is provided.

JB stated in the chat "Under Queens green canopy we've been asked to review the councils whole landholding for planting opportunities - 99% of those opportunities would be very small/sub-commercial scale. This is just one example of small-scale schemes not suitable to EWCO. These opportunities are many but just need something simple and attractive to draw them out."

AR thanked the AFG for their comments.

Keepers of Time (KoT)

KM presented the slides and asked the AFG 'What else should be included in the review?'.

AAI stated his support for tightening what is already included. He continued that the original document included veteran trees and ancient woodland, which should not be lost in the forthcoming review.

ND said that following internal RSPB feedback he would like to query the implementation of KoT and how well it's worked.

KM responded that a quick internal review of the initial 2005-2007 plan was undertaken to see whether what had been set out had been achieved. She continued that the programmes put in place will reflect policy and that specific implementation is not in scope at the moment.

ND replied he had progressed actions in the original worklist and queried whether those would be captured, continuing that he will need to feedback.

KM responded that **ND** may be contacted in time.

JW queried whether veteran trees will be brought into scope.

KM replied that they are looking at current policy and assessing whether there is capacity to include veteran trees. She continued that they are working with NE to see whether the scope needs to be expanded further and said that no reference currently in the document would be removed.

JB said that ancient woodland and veteran trees are our 'treasure houses' and have little protection. He continued that HS2 and the ringroad in Shropshire have damaged veteran

trees and stated that there is little to protect these trees and woodlands. He stated that more must be done but questioned whether KoT would be the right mechanism.

AAI agreed with **JB** in the chat and continued 'by-the-by an amendment to the Env Bill was passed last night which would significant improve protection'.

NE said in the chat 'Hi Katy, keen to be involved in any review process please.'.

KM asked the group 'Do you think the policy and strategic objectives are fit for purpose'?

NE stated that juniper woodlands are under threat.

KM responded that she would raise juniper woodlands with colleagues and questioned whether they would fall under ancient/semi-natural woodlands. She continued that the mapping category of long-established woodlands may flag juniper woodlands, but there is a need to figure out what it means for protection.

IB provided support for **NE** and continued that juniper is dispersed in the landscape and does not constitute a woodland. He stated that examples from previous discussions (coppices, hedgerows, ancient veteran, heartland) need to be encompassed in policy. He said that ancient woodland has been lost and that **AAI** may be able to further expand on issues with the development process. He continued that ancient woodlands are sought out by cost / benefit methodologies as cheaper to destroy to compensate for good quality agricultural land. He continued to raise three questions; the first regarding scope, the second about mechanisms, and the third about looking to ensure the policy objectives set out provides genuine protection so more ancient woodlands are not lost.

AAI suggested that ancient woodland should only be damaged in wholly exceptional circumstances. He stated that Local Authorities use economic factors to determine wholly exceptional circumstances and suggested that KoT further define it.

KM responded that she would look at the policy document to see how these can be carried out as expected.

ASP expressed confusion over PAWS restoration, continuing that plantations on ancient woodland sites which remove conifer to reinstate broadleaves narrows the options of species choice. He questioned whether there should be as much focus on PAWS restoration, continuing that establishing new woodland where possible is also important.

JW responded that this comment ties into the Woodland Resilience Improvement Plan.

ACTION: Update woodland inventory to 2.5 ha.

KM said that the woodland inventory allows Local Authorities to see which woodland is ancient woodland as it is mapped. She continued that the data would become available as it is long-term project running until 2024/25 provided it has funding.

Woodland Resilience Implementation Plan (WRIP)

KM presented the slides and informed the group that she is stepping in for Neil Riddle. The WRIP would be brought back to the AFG in the future.

CA queried how WRIP will be mapped and brought together for an industry strategy. She queried how it links into the timber policy road map and the green construction board.

KM stated that she is working with her counterpart in Defra to link together policy and ensure they are working together.

CA asked **KM** to contact her if any advice or assistance was needed.

NE queried linkages how the AFG will see what occurs with comms, training and the work David Bole is leading. He continued that this should be a whole package with links across the entire agenda from this AFG session. He stated that linking makes a difference and queried whether the sector is coming together. **NE** continued that it's about how David Bole's work and training links in, how comms and other agendas link in and how to share this all with the sector.

KM said she would take away **NE's** comments.

JW stated that resilience should run through the program looking at design and which species are key to sustainability.

POR questioned how WRIP interacts with the forestry and climate change working group.

KM responded that Neil is linked with the working group, so they have likely been identified. She stated that work has not properly commenced yet as they are awaiting more resource.

JB queried whether concerns around resilience stem from too much planting rather than natural regeneration. He continued that before planting, natural regeneration should be trialed as those species that regenerate and survive are likely to be suited to the site.

KM responded that she could not guarantee natural regeneration would be included, but she imagines it will be considered.

JW stated that natural colonisation has been included in EWCO for this reason.

KM said in the chat 'Just going back to KoT - would anyone on this call be interested in joining a workshop on this - would be interested in having industry representation from Confor/ ICF (and others if you're interested!) please do let me know'.

ACTION: AFG to contact KM if they would like to be involved.

ASP queried whether the detail on CS and EWCO supplements could be shared more widely.

JW responded that the AFG should refrain from going into detail regarding EWCO development but can share that there are supplements in the pipeline for CS. He continued that KoT and WRIP are both in ETAP and the public domain, so input is welcome from beyond the AFG.

JW thanked the AFG for their time and closed the meeting.

END