

Ref: AFG 11/21

AFG Minutes: 18 November 2021**Location:** Webinar/teleconference**Chair:** Joe Watts**Secretary:** Katie Booth**Attendees****AFG Members:**Andy Shirley-Priest (RFS) **ASP**Barnaby Coupe (Wildlife Trusts) **BC**Claire Douglas (RPA) **CD**Graham Garratt (ICF) **GG**Clare Pinches (NE) **CP**Nick Phillips (WT) **NP**Graham Clark (CLA) **GC**Ian Baker (Small Woods) **IB**Neil Douglas (RSPB) **ND**Neville Elstone (Cumbria Woodlands) **NE**Paul Orsi (Sylva) **POr**James Russell (Marston Vale) **JR****FC/Defra:**Alec Rhodes (FC) **AR**Evelina Budrike (FC) **EBu**Hugh Loxton (Defra) **HL**Joe Watts (FC) **JW**Andrew White (FC) **AW**Ellie Littlejohn (FC) **EL**Samantha Pollock (FC) **SP**Penny Oliver (FC) **POI**Danielle Standish (FC) **DS**Rory Lunny (Defra) **RL**Rosa Amboage (FC) **RA**Eloise Barker (FC) **EBa**Katie Booth (FC) **KB**Fjolla Morina (FC) **FM****Apologies:**

Adrian Sherwood (RPA)

Caroline Ayre (Confor)

Brian Fraser (HTA)

David Lewis (RICS)

Adrian Jowitt (Natural England)

Andrew Allen (Woodland Trust)

Stan Abbott (WT)

Jackie Dunne (Confor)

John Blessington (Local Government)

AFG Minutes

Welcome

JW opened the session and welcomed all.

Changes to HT Woodland Improvement

EBu presented slides.

Small Woodland Top Up Incentive

NE queried if this can be shared and **EBu** confirmed it is confirmed and will be included in manuals and RPA communications.

GG queried if it involves signing up for same the same operations to justify the payment. **EBu** clarified that there is no additional form, but yes you will still need to do the relevant prescriptions.

IB raised that a lot of small woodlands are below 3ha, so whilst this is welcome it would also be welcome to take the threshold even lower. **EBu** confirmed that we recognise this and are looking at it for future incentives. If we see a significant uptake because of this, it will help to give us the ammunition to look at lower levels. We also have logged the idea of looking at joint ownership applications.

NE wanted to thank **EBu** for the work and the good news.

NP commented that the small woodland supplement feels like a positive step and agreed it will be good to review the size threshold and group scheme opportunities.

WS1 – Deer control and management

EBu confirmed deer evidence is to be provided by April.

WS2 – PAWS restoration

EBu confirmed the middle two PAWS requirements have been removed.

NP would like to come back on possible additional activities to be funded after speaking to site teams, perhaps uneconomic management, rhododendron etc.

NE asked in the chat "Nick are you going to see if there is any learning from W Trust Green Recovery project? It's a pilot really/learning."

NE also commented "I wonder if monitoring needs to be included in PAWs? Good news more £s for PAWS". **NP** agreed this is a good point.

EBu confirmed that Danielle (DS) is on the call and confirmed that feedback can be provided to her using her email address that **DS** provided in the chat.

DS confirmed there are provisions for rhododendron so this could not be added but the other items mentioned are good to explore.

EBu confirmed everything compatible with WD2 is compatible with these incentives.

WS4 access for people

EBu asked for suggestions on how additional activities could be funded to make this supplement stronger.

NE raised the issue of transient populations, for example the Lake District, where they may not have the number of inhabitants to qualify but capture large transient populations. **EBu** confirmed we would like to reduce the population mark for settlements. **NE** confirmed some of the most used woodlands are away from settlements and suggested we could use car park usage etc. to make sure these areas are rewarded. Suggested that it is possible a QR code at the gate which links to a map could be used for smaller sites. This might need to be quite well paid if a series of visits is required.

POI suggested this could be part of the extra evidence WO's could consider. **EBu** confirmed a list of additional elements is being produced to allow discretion for some and this could be one of those.

GG gave an example of an estate manager he spoke to last week who confirmed the estate had been awash with people and they came from some distance rather than locally. He mentioned that it feels historic to be looking at how close land is to the urban population. He confirmed what has been presented all look like good improvements but would like clarification on what the WD2 is being paid for. He queried if deer management is still an obligation if it is in the management plan or whether it is opt in, opt out. **EBu** confirmed that only three WD2 prescriptions were mandatory, and this is supplementing the delivery of certain prescriptions such as deer. Payment rates are being reviewed but for similar reasons we are leaving this as is but tailoring through focused supplements, essentially topping up. She confirmed that it is necessary to tick the WD for deer, squirrels etc if relevant and then provide evidence to obtain a supplement for activities in excess of what you need to do for WD2.

JR pointed out that reflecting on how much of the Public Forest Estate (with its track record quality for recreational benefits) would qualify is a good way of thinking about it. We have huge activities with economic benefits that we risk being blind to depending on

how criteria are designed. Looking at land through a recreational lens does not add up to having to be next to populations. There is a need to consider if things to make places safe for access could be funded, such as footbridges or other structures, and queried if the scheme provides for this. **EBu** confirmed as an area-based payment it is difficult to ascertain and will need to confirm and advise if capital items for infrastructure apply.

IB agreed there is a need for access provisions to be supported regardless of location/proximity to urban areas. **POI** confirmed there are no plans to bring in capital payments. She advised that recreation and access are not supported well under CS, so it will be necessary to have a look and see if we can adapt anything if it does not exist. We will not manage to get new items now.

NE advised in the chat that "Those items fell out during the last RDPE to 21, they were in the previous RPDE".

JR acknowledged this in the chat, commenting "Indeed, and it was a UK Govt decision as they were not co-funded by the EU, but such things will be needed in many cases to provide the standard of access desired."

NE went on to comment that "Yep, just thinking about getting them included in ELMs if you think of HLS as a development ground for ELMs".

GG raised that as there has previously been no funding, items have not been included in management plans, so this could be a missed opportunity. **EBu** confirmed an approach designed not to disadvantage customers means that, we would not expect it to be in your plan necessarily but would like to make you eligible. Supplements will still be allowed even if not detailed in a management plan, and we need to make the guidance clear on this. **EBu** confirmed all will have discretion.

ACTION: All to direct comments regarding access and PAWS to DS (email given in chat – danielle.standish@forestrycommission.gov.uk).

GC requested clarification as to whether the four supplements are only applicable to small woodlands. **EBu** confirmed they are for any WD2 woodland and not just small, that payments are area-based, and **DS** is working out rates currently. **DS** clarified £1,000 is the new standard WD2 for small woodland instead of £100 per hectare, then supplements will be paid in addition for any size woodland. Rates are to be confirmed and feedback or evidence is welcome, please get in touch with evidence or ideas

ACTION: All to direct comments/feedback with evidence to DS (email given in chat – danielle.standish@forestrycommission.gov.uk).

EBu noted that the handbook/guidance will include some examples to show what you would get in certain instances, depending on what supplements are taken and how you can stack them. She also confirmed that the team will come back and present the rates when they are available.

JW clarified that if you have an existing WD2 agreement you then cannot apply for the supplements, they are just for new applicants.

GG commented in the chat that "These supplements and the way they are to be administered appear to be a positive development".

Regulations Update

EL presented slides.

NE queried in the chat "Where have the greatest issues arisen from FC point of view with the submission of EIA stuff broadly?". **EB** responded that feedback from area teams is generally that applications are often incomplete and do not supply enough information for the FC to give an Opinion. Our new forms and guidance are designed to help applicants give all the required information up front.

The links to all the new pages were given in the chat, as below:

[Environmental Impact Assessments for woodland](#)

[Forestry project checks – all projects](#)

[Forestry project checks – constraints](#)

[EIA afforestation application form & guidance](#)

[EIA deforestation application form & guidance](#)

[EIA roads & quarries application form & guidance](#)

ACTION: Feedback requested on the new EIA guidance to be sent to **EB** at eloise.barker@forestrycommission.gov.uk.

ND queried what the difference is between FC's stage 1 and 2 powers. **EL** confirmed that direction is linked to stage 1 and is where we do not meet our statutory timescales and it is escalated to the Secretary of State (SoS). In reality, this has never happened.

PO and **GG** queried cases going automatically to SoS in terms of whether there is a separate process or if they would come back to FC. **JW** will take away to confirm response to auto referral but believes cases would come back to the FC.

ACTION: **JW** to confirm the process followed if an EIA case is escalated to the SoS.

FLA exemptions

GG questioned that the pie chart appeared to show everything as conditional applications except thinning. **EL** confirmed the pie chart shows what could be exempt. **JW** clarified that GG was correct as in reality all are conditional subsets.

ND queried what the saving is of something not going on to the registers and that there could be an issue if the public cannot find information about felling in their areas. **EL** confirmed 28 days is the saving. She also clarified that it will still be published, it is just that the consultation 28 days does not apply, so public can still locate information in the same way via the FC.

POr acknowledged it was a great job to simplify and queried if the exception is something people indicate when they make an application. Is there a process for them advising us they believe an exemption might apply? **EL** confirmed yes there is, and the Ops Note contains information on this.

NE offered the time of his team to review the amendments in the chat "Carrie (carrie@cumbriawoodlands.co.uk) in my team was on workshop in April for EIA regs, happy to offer her time to read through amends etc if you want an external view" and **EL** was pleased to accept this offer.

ACTION: **EL/EB** to contact Carrie to request feedback.

EWCO – update and future improvements

AR presented slides.

JW queried with the group if delays in processing applications are becoming critical – no comments received. **AR** confirmed that additional staff and training is being put in place and the team are doing everything they can to get them out. The average is about 14 weeks processing currently.

NP raised that the last natural regeneration report showed low uptake and asked if there are views or evidence on why that is and how things may be able to be done differently in future. **AR** confirmed the level of uptake remains limited and there is still a question mark over why. There is a suggestion that it could be taking some time to settle in but reassured the group that the team worked hard to make sure natural colonisation had the same offer/access to payment as planting. We have done what we could.

BC picked up on a comment about expanding native broadleaf, querying that it appeared half of funding was towards high nature recovery but only 76% of planting was native.

How does that compare with national average planting rates for broadleaf, taken as a proxy for native? Historical KPIs show around 90%. **AR** confirmed the comparative analysis is yet to be done. We are not seeing 91% and will need to look at it. **BC** happy to pick up offline. **AR** confirmed that would be helpful and advised we are trying to balance the push for new native woodland with a degree of resilience planning, not at the expense of undermining new native woodland, but encouraging a variety of planting.

NE raised that he was going to make the same point Alec did and also mentioned that a 70% figure matches UKFS guidance.

GG referred to a programme of interviewing landowners they have been undertaking about undertaking afforestation where they showed a number of photos. He commented that the image from the front of the FC natural recolonisation guidance could do with improvement. **SP** will take feedback to Mark Broadmeadow who owns that guidance. **JW** acknowledged the need to be careful what story images tell. **JW** queried what feedback the group is getting regarding natural colonisation, what are the thoughts on why the uptake is apparently low? **GG** responded that everyone he is speaking to would be open to it where it was felt it would be successful.

JR responded to query why we would be worried if the level is low, given the opportunity has been provided and this will take time to filter through. Having it as another option is what has always been wanted. If there is feedback about why people are not taking it up then we can work on it, but he feels we should not be focusing too tightly on targets unless clear barriers are being raised. In the chat **JR** commented "The natural colonisation offer is still pretty new, and the technical guidance landed not that long back, so I'd say it's far, far too early to judge".

NP commented that the ELM scheme is closed to them, and it would be useful to understand what tweaks need to be made and it is important to glean as much evidence as possible to help make it happen, so we avoid jumping to conclusions about why people are not taking it up.

JR acknowledged the comments so far but felt the role of the group is to make sure it is an option offered by FC.

NP confirmed he would feel more confident if we had more evidence to support it.

JR acknowledged in the chat "Nick Phillips - you're probably right to seek more comfort on how colonisation will be assessed, but I'll continue to promote the base principle that it simply must be presented as an option alongside other mechanisms".

NP responded in the chat “I agree James, good to promote as baseline mech alongside others”.

ND asked if there is an update on the repayments issue that was previously affecting the offer and if the position has changed. **AR** confirmed this blocker has been removed so land managers can transfer out of ES into EWCO without recovery, if the transfer is deemed to have an environmental improvement. Data can be analysed for the group if needed. **JW** confirmed there are some significant schemes that have been unblocked due to this work.

JR raised that it sends a powerful signal if those old agreements also see an increase in maintenance rates in line with the Goldsmith ministerial commitment. **SP** confirmed in chat new agreement would need to be issued and addressed query about change in T&Cs, confirming “No I don't see this as a change to Ts and Cs (which are payment rate agnostic, and merely point to the agreement documents - i.e. final application docs), but more around a change to agreement values/claim schedules”.

GG mentioned in the chat that “Would water supply apply to all schemes where new in field woods might cut off access to field edge water troughs?” and on the call raised that cutting off field edges will result in water supply needing to be moved and there is an embedded cost there that could be picked up. **AR** acknowledged he does not believe this has been considered and will put into the team's thinking.

GG also raised in the chat “Is periodic agreement doc re-issuing an unneeded admin burden Sam?”. **SP** responded in the chat to confirm “Yes, but I think unavoidable if e.g. rates change - we need to have an audit trail with agreement holders. Going forwards our internal IT development will make this sort of exercise easier, though”.

NP commented that this is very encouraging and queried how we control the offers as there is such a range out there and there is an increasing overlap. He acknowledged that the join up at regional level is encouraging but would be keen to have a chat about how we work together at a national level.

NE agreed with **NP** in chat “Nick, vital stuff, competition/fighting over engaging and funding owners needs more work locally and nationally, real issue. Agree Nick struggle to see forum for coms/engagement/training then advice and ultimately grant aid”.

JW commented that for the long short-list for EWCO 1.1 and in particular EWCO Lite we are asking AFG to advise.

GG commented that the ICF presentation showed it is a good offer and a lot of landowners will like it. It has wide appeal so need to get it better publicised, as there will be marginal land when BPS goes owners will want to do something with.

JR queried in the chat "can you confirm the timescale for the final regulatory confirmation of the 'withdraw from CS without penalty'? I understand that FC are working at risk with the current approach. And confirm that this extends to EWCO and all Woodland Creation Partnerships?" **SP** responded to confirm "We're seeking a programme modification from the EU towards the end of the year. We're just awaiting further detail from colleagues on this at the moment. I asked the question re Woodland Creation Partnerships (again) just yesterday".

NE raised that in the guidance/training space there is a lot of confusion and overlap. He understands there are several campaigns being launched by Defra, FC, locally, private sector, WT etc., all pitched separately. There does not seem to be an appropriate forum to ensure join up and support of each other rather than overlap and competition.

JW acknowledged the comments and advised that the NCF has a Delivery Advisory Group and the ETAP implementation team are developing forums that may provide a platform for this.

NP agreed this is an important area (he sits on the NCF DAG). WT are having the same conversations and we do not want to be competing. NCF groups are good but insufficient and there is a need for a wider group with more time to look at the whole package.

NP also raised he has a lack of awareness about the back-to-basics campaign being launched soon by FC.

NE noted in the chat that he would like to catch-up with **NP** on this "Nick, would be good to catch up off link about coms stuff that would be good neville@cumbriawoodlands.co.uk".

NE requested a considered response on this topic. **JW** agreed that a degree of coordination will make messages simpler for future woodland creators and he will take that away.

GG acknowledged that **NE** raised a good point about training and promotion, but landowners and land agents are not looking for FC to approach them and outline opportunities, rather they are looking to their internal advisory community. So, you need a group of foresters to be trained in the detail of the offers and they will then act as advocates. **JW** fully agrees and one of the intentions of the ICF training was to give people the information to go out and promote.

GG expressed that he felt this is not as enriching as face to face meetings and this would be a stronger way of doing it.

NE noted there is a wide array of ways to do this, and a need to be more imaginative.

JR feels that improved access to national data sets is key. National Forests have had difficulty accessing them and issues with the data it holds not being good or complete, then being directed to other sources that are not easy to interrogate. The position is fragmented, and we need to work collectively to overcome some issues. Our systems are not fit for purpose currently and **JR** would encourage further work in this area.

ND mentioned net gain and private finance, acknowledging he does not know enough about net gain but is there somewhere we should be looking for Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) or is it just related to EWCO? **RA** responded to confirm we are still trying to deal with the issue around how grants interact with new mandatory offset markets for natural capital. The policy position is not clear and has yet to be agreed and defined. We are attending meetings and providing feedback from those on the ground, but it is still not clear if it is possible if you are a recipient of a grant to also access income from biodiversity offsets. Defra Green Finance is hoping for more clear guidance in the new year. BNG is under consultation now so you can still input. It is possible to stack with WCC, so it is good on the carbon side but less clear elsewhere.

Woodland Creation Guide

SP talked the group through the guide briefly, sharing her screen. As much as possible has been put into appendices. The assumption is that it is better to have it all in one place and we wanted to give as wide a variety in terms of examples as we can.

There are diagrams of what to think about, do and produce at each step, and examples of maps and different styles of these. There are annotated photos, an example issues log and a comprehensive list of data sources. It is intended as a one stop shop.

There will be a need to periodically update it in future.

SP requested that AFG members please use it and give us feedback. We want it to be useful and are willing to update it to make sure it is what is needed. **SP** expressed thanks to **Por** for his comments that have been reflected in the guide.

NE confirmed it is great to see a reference book, but we need to bring it to life. We cannot just tell people to read this. The animation of it is the missing link. **SP**

acknowledged this is just the syllabus and not the way of getting it into minds. We can look at holding workshops and events. **NE** confirmed it goes back to having a forum across organisations. **SP** confirmed this is hopefully the starting point for that and **NE** acknowledged this and thanked the team for the work.

JR also thanked **SP** for the work and confirmed his colleagues found it helpful to put the information together in a sequential way in the ICF session.

In the chat, **NE** commented “Also local tutorials/field visits, link to LMS so you can track user engagement”.

POr advised that he thought it looked great. Building on **NE**’s point, he has found that when providing guidance alongside short video clips, people access via the videos and not the document. **SP** will feed this back and also acknowledged it the chat “Neville and others: I’ll feed these great ideas to our sector capacity & promotion and engagement leads to take forward. Thanks”.

AOB

RA advised the group that she is leaving at the end of the year, thanked everyone for their help and introduced Fjolla Morina, the new Economist.

PO raised that the LNR part of ELM is heading into proper development now and they are looking for volunteers for user testing. She asked the group to please encourage people in your networks to sign up to make sure woodland and the forestry sector are represented. ELM will be a substantive item in December.

IB raised it is important to up the input of woodland interests into each but there is also a need to have a national overlay of individual local nature strategies so they do not counter ELM. **PO** acknowledged that LNR strategies may be another topic for a future AFG and we could bring Kate Tobin in, and acknowledged the importance of being involved in the design process.

PO confirmed the CS woodland creation grant closure is 31 December 2021 – this information is confidential as it is not in public domain yet. The ten-year maintenance option remains for those already under agreement and those in the pipeline

JW thanked the AFG for their time, apologised for going over and closed the meeting.

END