

Ref: AFG 01/22

AFG Minutes: 03 February 2022**Location:** Webinar/teleconference**Chair:** Joe Watts**Secretary:** Katie Booth**Attendees****AFG Members:**Claire Douglas (RPA) **CD**Graham Garratt (ICF) **GG**Nick Phillips (WT) **NP**Ian Baker (Small Woods) **IB**Neil Douglas (RSPB) **ND**Neville Elstone (Cumbria Woodlands) **NE**Paul Orsi (Sylva) **POr**Caroline Ayre (Confor) **CA**Jackie Dunne (Confor) **JD**David Lewis (RICS) **DL**Clive Thomas (Soil Association) **CT**Cheryl Lundberg (RFS) **CL****FC/Defra:**David West (FC) **DW**Alec Rhodes (FC) **AR**Hugh Loxton (Defra) **HL**Joe Watts (FC) **JW**Samantha Malpass (FC) **SM**Penny Oliver (FC) **POI**Rory Lunny (Defra) **RL**Katie Booth (FC) **KB**Richard Pow (FC) **RP**Hannah Dawson (FC) **HD**Rebecca Waite (Defra) **RW****Apologies:**

Adrian Sherwood (RPA)

Brian Fraser (HTA)

Adrian Jowitt (Natural England)

John Blessington (Local Government)

Graham Clark (CLA)

AFG Minutes

Welcome

JW opened the session and welcomed all. Those new to the Group (Clive Thomas for the Soil Association and Cheryl Lundberg for the Royal Forestry Society) introduced themselves.

FE Woodland Creation Partnership

DW presented his slides.

JD asked what the key drivers for the project and the underlying aims were.

DW responded that, as the largest landowner of forests and woodland, FE wanted to see how it could support woodland creation. We have been dealing in leases for a long time and wanted to provide a new lease option as part of a suite of schemes available. It offers a different way to provide support to landowners who do not have the skillset or resources to go through the whole process of getting all permissions, planting, and managing woodland. **JD** confirmed that the driver is essentially increasing woodland creation. **DW** agreed.

JD asked why one of the key features is 80/20 broadleaf and conifer. Are we missing an opportunity to showcase other types of sites? **DW** acknowledged that this was not the original intention but must work within the guidance given for the NCF Programme.

NP thanked **DW** for the presentation and confirmed it is good to hear positive progress. **NP** queried what the desired outcomes are and how is it monitored. **DW** advised every site has a natural capital audit done and we work with Natural England when identifying suitable sites. **NP** reiterated his query regarding the desired outcome. **DW** advised the audit gives us a baseline and the intention to improve on that baseline is the key outcome. Individual species counts and other forms of monitoring are likely to be part of it but essentially, we are working to improve upon the baseline. **JW** clarified that all woodland will be UKFS compliant.

CL supported **JD**'s comment about promoting commercial conifer. **DW** clarified that the target of 80/20 is for the overall target for this part of the Programme, so there will be variation on individual projects and potential for some to have higher levels of either broadleaf or conifer.

CT queried if anything is written into agreements for the longer term. **DW** advised that technically at the end of the lease the land goes back to the landowner, but we would encourage them to renew. **DW** confirmed public access is therefore only for the period of

the lease. **CT** suggested that perhaps these things could be dedicated as part of the original agreement.

POr queried if this product is effectively making us a state competitor to the private sector. Or are we focused on Local Authorities (LAs) without the ability to manage sites over a long period. **DW** acknowledged there are several other lease opportunities out there [in the private sector], but they are generally shorter, and they do not offer what this product does. Essentially, we are asking for land to become a temporary part of the public forest estate and there are other things we need to do as part of that, such as ensuring public access. **POr** raised there remains a concern that we may be taking opportunism away from the private sector, but **DW** advised our central focus is on clients such as LAs.

NE asked about how to interact with the scheme and what rates can be offered. **DW** advised there is a maximum rate that has been shared with stakeholders, the team having spoken to a wide range of people to identify this. Each rent has been negotiated individually and all so far have been below that maximum figure. It is commercially sensitive and cannot be made public. We have to offer value for money and are working with the community forests, particularly the Mersey Forest. We would like to be seen as part of the solution for the larger scale projects. **NE**, **GG**, and **JD** all raised in the chat the need for some level of figure to be provided in order that they can promote it to potential applicants. **JW** confirmed no figures will be given. **DW** offered to provide Jim Lee's contact details, as the Lead Land Advisor for FE, for anyone wishing to discuss the product and possible rent figures in more detail.

ND wanted to understand better what the FE woodland creation partnership was funding. Is it about 1% of the estate, and is it an opportunity to diversify the whole estate? **DW** would be happy to have more applications than we have funds for, and we could make a case for further funding. **DW** is hopeful we will deliver more hectares than the target we have.

GG wanted to pick up the competition issue. He also advised that, as a land agent he is happy for this to be another option for his clients, but he will struggle to promote it if he cannot gain an understanding of what the potential income might be. **DW** advised we have offered a finder's fee to identify suitable sites in some cases and Jim Lee should be contacted to discuss rates. It is a locally negotiated scheme with so many variables, so it is impossible to give a certain figure. **GG** felt it would help if the language could be developed to give a steer as to what is being offered.

DW gave a minimum figure of £150 per hectare. **NE** acknowledged that the minimum figure is useful. **DW** advised that rent is in line with standard rates. **JW** backed up that the offer must be competitive as it is being taken up, please contact Jim Lee for more

details. **GG** confirmed in the chat that he does not need to know the maximum amount just approximate levels. **DW** confirmed in the chat "I would suggest that a competitive rent for low intensity grazing in lowland and upland England would be in the order of £250 to £300/Ha - hope this is helpful".

DW also advised the group that we have had 1,436 hectares that has come forward so far.

CA queried if the team has spoken to ICF members, and they have been properly represented. **DW** confirmed this has happened.

DW provided Jim Lee's contact details (james.lee@forestryengland.uk) and the link to the website (<https://www.forestryengland.uk/woodland-creation>) in the chat.

LATF and UTCF Updates

HD presented the slides.

GG queried if there is a central record to show which authorities have been allocated a LATF grant.

On the topic of the need for registration with RPA, **HD** advised you do not have to register the land, just to register as a person. **GG** advised that anything that involves an explicit interaction with the RPA will put people off. **HD** advised it is an automatically generated SBI that must be applied for. **SM** clarified in the chat "land does not need to be registered on the LMS - it's only customer registration that we are now requiring for the two grants ". **GG** asked in the chat, "Are customers the LAs or the people taking and planting the trees?". **SM** confirmed it is the LAs and "It's the lead applicant that needs to be registered as they are who we will pay (and they are then responsible for any onward disbursement to partners or landowners)".

NP queried what type of bids we are receiving, is it from large urban LAs or smaller, more local ones. His query was based on the Woodland Trust (WT) bringing in some funding for LAs and their desire to identify where they can best add value. **HD** advised that because of the umbrella bids option, a variety of levels of LAs can apply. **HD** feels we have seen a mixture and it has been good to see a lot of partnership work between the unitary authorities and lower tiers. **NP** asked if there is any information/breakdown on what has been applied for available and **HD** advised we can look after the meeting and provide some data to support and guide the WT.

JD mentioned it would be good to target some cities and towns hit badly by the storms and **HD** thanked **JD** for the suggestion. **JW** advised the group we will come back later in

the year with an update on where LATF has been taken up and what is coming through from the agreements.

ACTION: **KB** to add to a future agenda later this year an update on the progress of LATF.

Ready to Plant Pilot

SP presented her slides.

NP queried in the chat if Fit to Plant and Ready to Plant are the same thing and **SM** confirmed they are, the name has changed.

NE asked about possible roll out to other schemes such as CS. **SM** advised there is a commitment that at some point it will apply to all government funded planting.

JD wondered what communications are being done with nurseries so she can feel confident whether nurseries are going down this road anyway. **JD** also raised that the 'Contacting the supplier' part of the process looks much simpler than it is, you might change suppliers during the project. **SM** acknowledged this and noted this is exactly the type of thing the group working on this want to hear. They are trying to gather info about who is not thinking about plant healthy and who will need to go through the certificate process. **JW** confirmed we will take **JD**'s comments and pass them to the team.

CA noted in the chat that "All of the NPG members have fed into the Plant Healthy Management Standard. That doesn't include smaller nurseries though and offered a presentation from APHA on plant import requirements. Three group members agreed they would be interested.

NP raised that urban tree planting is higher risk and so would encourage that this is the next step quickly, as EWCO may be lower risk. He would like LATF /UTCF to get involved. Brian Fraser also raised a query about when it will be expanded to LATF and UTCF ahead of the meeting, as he was unable to attend. **SM** reminded everyone that we have existing requirements around biosecurity. Everyone who gets a UTCF agreement gets a booklet to give them a lot of instructions, and it details the requirements they need to meet. This project is to consolidate what exists and we do not want to disrupt supply chains too greatly by changing the entire thing at once. What is happening currently is not bad, this is just to improve it. **MP** asked what the requirements are for biosecurity. **SM** confirmed we already ask people to confirm they are plant healthy or equivalent, this will just formalise it by asking for a certificate.

GG queried whether this will be offset with more flexibility over the planting timetable given, for example the issues over oak. **SM** acknowledged this is on the risk register for the project. Blanket restrictions will not be provided as part of the process. We will have an amendment process similar to all schemes.

JD advised we would need to know if not being able to do this means we would not get the grant, and this should be transparent. **SM** agreed the need for clarity on this and thanked **JD** for raising it.

EWCO update

AR presented his slides and gave slightly updated figures from today.

Just over 40% of applications have had missing information of some description.

DL asked about the poor-quality maps issue and how many are failing because of this. It would be helpful to have some examples of exemplar schemes and finished examples of what we expect, particularly for maps, would be a valuable resource. **AR** thanked **DL** for the feedback and confirmed this is the intention. **JW** mentioned we are also working on a handy hints e-alert.

JD wondered whether sites that have been through WCPG are able to be processed more quickly. It would be best if the same people process both the WCPG and EWCO application, as this could be a sticking point. **AR** acknowledged this and advised there may be some variation in area teams, but our internal guidance encourages WOs and WCOs to work together to remove any surprises. **AR** is not aware of this being a blocker. **JD** then asked how transitions are going. **AR** advised it has been a mixed bag, there are still some to be processed, it is not always straightforward to transition as sometimes people have taken the opportunity to do some redesign and this has slowed things down a little. We are getting towards the end of them, and they remain a priority.

CT commented that, with regards to prioritisation criteria, he appreciates the pressure to deliver hectares but if we are trying to encourage farmers to integrate edges and smaller groups of woodland, there may have to be another way of approaching this. He queried if some smaller applications could be fast tracked as they are lower risk. **AR** acknowledged it is a fair challenge. All schemes are subject to the same checks, so it is more efficient to focus on the larger schemes to deliver the hectares. It is only intended to be a guide to assist area teams though, and they still have discretion to push through schemes they perceive as straightforward. **CT** advised this will be more relevant to future development.

GG thanked **AR** for the update and raised that it is evident there is a steep learning curve happening and so this will likely result in changes. He made a request to try not to add complexity while making these improvements. He expressed shock at how many applications were found to be inadequate and wondered if there is a need to balance what is required with the risk involved. He queried if best practice is what is needed or would good enough suffice, to keep it simple and proportionate. **AR** thanked **GG** for the feedback and agreed it has been a learning curve and we have had to iterate the guidance. While EWCO is not as simple as we perhaps may have hoped, there is a reason for all information we ask for to comply with the Grant Functional Standard. He is happy to have a look and see if we can be more proportionate, but it may be hard to strip anything out while still showing we are following the rules in terms of the Standard.

CA raised the need for a conversation about how EWCO moves into ELMs, raising the need to get this right as it is the forerunner to what comes next in Defra. We should be able to get this right as we have been doing it for a long time. **AR** acknowledged that yes, we do want to get it right and a lot of effort has gone into trying to get it right. Everything is there for a reason and things have changed significantly from previous schemes. We do hear and acknowledge the challenges to keep it simple and straightforward. **CA** appreciates this and confirms the team are doing a good job.

ND thanked **AR** for the statistics, as requested, and acknowledged they are nice and clear. He queried if it is roughly on track with what you are expecting to deliver, and what the overall picture is like on uptake. **JW** advised uptake is good (could always be better), and our attention is on processing to turn the applications into agreements. Uptake is positive and it has been a strong start. **ND** raised the mention of riparian targeting mapping being due for review. Colleagues on reserves have noted it seems to abruptly end based on maps and is not reflecting the reality on the ground. **ND** is happy to line up a conversation with reserve managers who have picked this up, and **AR** said that would be good, and hopes the update will rectify some of this. **AR** acknowledged there are some strange pieces in the mapping and hopefully the new information will address that.

JD raised concern about changes for water scores and gave an example of one agreement that did not score with the new mapping but had under older schemes. If the mapping changes, existing schemes will need to be reviewed as they may have scored differently. **CA** noted in the chat that "AA form has been an issue with some members applications" and **JD** asked if agent authority forms are a reason for many rejected applications. **AR** is not aware of this being an issue but will check and come back to the group. **AR** advised that the riparian buffer mapping should be sharper than that for CS and the key change is that the buffer has reduced, which shrank the targeting area. This is believed to be correct. EWCO is paying for a specific ecosystem benefit of shading a water course, so the lower scoring may be correct. He acknowledges the point that we

need to look back and understand how schemes in the pipeline are affected to make sure no-one is unfairly disadvantaged.

ACTION: AR to investigate if agent authority form issues have caused any problems with processing EWCO grant applications and feed back to the AFG.

AOB

Storm Arwen update from **RP**

CA posted a newsletter link in the chat that may answer some questions about the Storm Arwen response, and also added links to windblow maps (<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/2df27ce217fd4bada220e81485f1c616> and <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/news/new-citizen-science-app-launched/>).

RP advised we recognise the need to support the sector by accelerating the approval of felling licences subject to all due diligence. We are recruiting more staff – we have 2 agency WOs to focus on licence processing and another joining later in the month. We are taking all opportunities to use the exemption from public register requirements, as per action note 144. There is agreement on how we interpret this regarding Arwen windblow, and as a result a significant number will not require it. Field visits will take a risk-based approach. These three factors in combination we hope will drive down processing time and any issues with felling licences. We will be looking to process applications relating to pine rapidly to avoid the risks of things such as blue stain. We have a disproportionate proportion of pine given the area affected.

NE wondered if there is going to be any restock support. **JW** advised there is no support currently. **NE** raised this has been mentioned previously and referenced EU issues being the reason for its withdrawal so the position may now change. **JW** advised it was not necessarily an EU rule that led to the withdrawal.

JD also felt it was presented as related to EU rules when it was removed and feels it could be brought back in in specific circumstances, such as storm Arwen.

CA noted in the chat that “It may have been an England interpretation of the EU regs!!”, **NE** acknowledged it was, and **POI** advised “It is on the list for consideration in E.L.M linked to resilience”.

JD advised there is a train hugger agreement where you can get 50 pence a tree.

Landscape Recovery update from **ME**

ME explained that this launched on the 1st of February with applications open until 24th May for the first round, there will be subsequent rounds. The first-round focusses on wildlife and recovering specific restoration of priority habitat and the second will be water quality, supporting streams and rivers. Application parameters are 500-5,000 hectares from individuals or groups. It is scored based on criteria, and applicants will receive up to two years' of funding. It is expected to support long-term (up to 20-year) projects.

Tree Health Pilots query from **JD**

JD queried what else is happening with them, there are group schemes but because it is a pilot it feels like everything is constantly moving. She would like to find out from anyone else how they are getting on. **JW** invited feedback from the group. **NE** supported what **JD** had said, advising it would be good to find out what other applications there are and if there are any gaps so we can try to fill them. He feels unsighted on it now. **JW** advised we will return to the topic at the next meeting to provide some feedback.

ACTION: KB to add Tree Health Pilots update to the agenda for the AFG in March.

CS update from **PO**

The window opens on the 8th of February. Supplements are coming in as planned and as presented to the AFG. There will be an extensive e-alert next week about the window opening.

CA – nursery stock and availability

CA advised she has received a couple of emails from nurseries who have had significant contracts canceled because of the approvals process.

JW invited comment for the group on this.

JD advised had not yet had to cancel a contract as she is putting different people in contact with each other to move plants around. Ordering plants is getting harder but in February the trees may all become available again as orders are cancelled. Longer contracts would help.

JW acknowledged this and advised we hear what you say. We want to keep pressure on getting agreements out from now onwards, so people are in a better position next season. We are trying as hard as we can.

CA advised that Scotland are not experiencing the same challenges and the nurseries do want a response. **JW** advised that the realistic response is that we are doing all we can to get approvals out.

Other AOB

NE raised a request for the next meeting. He would like the recently launched woodland creation campaign to be brought to the attention of the group to give the AFG a chance to comment. Following a lot of the links tells you to speak to the FC and he queried if this is the right approach. A discussion as to whether we should point anything elsewhere would be valuable. It would also be good to clarify how the various points of contact then interact with the private sector.

ACTION: KB to add to a future agenda and ask Lucy Wyatt and the communications team to attend.

CT advised it has been a useful first meeting and asked if there is a forward look detailing themes that require input. **JW** advised that it is a turbulent situation but if we can look further ahead, we will try to. Equally, if there is anything you would like to discuss please bring it forward.

JD raised it would be good to discuss the interaction of changes in RPA maps and how this impedes maintenance agreements when boundaries are changed (but not by the landowner). **POI** acknowledged this and advised we are trying to input into the guidance to try and make sure it does not happen again. We could try and get RPA colleagues along to discuss. We will aim to do that and add it to a future agenda.

ACTION: POI to approach the RPA with a view to asking them to attend a future AFG meeting to discuss the mapping issues.

The meeting closed at 16:00.

END