

Trees and Woodland Scientific Advisory Group (TAW-SAG) meeting 7 minutes: 10 March 2022

Attendees

- Rob MacKenzie (RMK) – (Chair), School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences University of Birmingham; Birmingham Institute of Forest Research
- Ian Bateman (IB) - Director of the Land, Environment, Economics and Policy Institute. University of Exeter
- Richard Buggs (RB) – (Observer), Kew Gardens, Plant Health Group
- Paul Burgess (PB) - Ecology and Management, Cranfield Soil and Agri-food Institute Cranfield University
- Keith Kirby (KK) - Department of Plant Sciences, University of Oxford
- Ruth Mitchell (RM) - Biodiversity and Ecosystems Group, Ecological Sciences Department, James Hutton Institute
- Chris Quine (CQ) – (Observer), Chief Scientist, Forest Research
- Patricia Thornley (PT) - School of Engineering and Applied Science, Aston University
- Stephen Cavers (SC) - Ecology Evolution and Environmental Change - Centre for Ecology and Hydrology
- Mike Morecroft (MM) – (Observer), Principal specialist on climate change, Natural England and senior visiting research associate, Oxford University
- Julie Urquhart (JU) - Environmental Social Science at University of Gloucestershire
- Maggie Roe (MR) - Landscape Planning Research and Policy Engagement, University of Newcastle
- Clare Trivedi (CT) – (Guest – Centre for Forest Protection), Tree Health Scientific Advisor, Plant Health Team, Defra
- Daisy Ellis (DE) - Head of Strategy, Engagement and Analysis, Defra
- Clare Williams (CW) – Evidence and Analysis Team for Trees and Forestry, Defra
- Charlotte Williams (ChW) (Secretary – took the minutes), Research and Development (RD) Project Delivery Advisor, Defra

Apologies

- Yadvinder Malhi (YM) - Ecosystems Research, Environmental Change Institute, Oxford University
- Bella Murfin (BM) – Tree Programme Director, Defra
- Naomi Matthiessen (NM) – Tree Programme Director, Defra

Item 1: Welcome and updates

1. RMK welcomed everyone to the seventh meeting of the TAW-SAG.
2. RMK introduced ChW who has recently joined the Defra Evidence and Analysis Team and will be taking the minutes.

Item 2: Review and agree minutes

3. The minutes of the last meeting were reviewed with the following points for amendment.
 - a. Paragraph 8d - should be amended to "...grants were also open to FR as well as academics... The change of the PSRE status was the cause of this change."
 - b. Paragraph 8 – include a bullet point on the awareness of conflicts of interest and the need for transparency.
 - c. Paragraph 6e – amend to "Planting depends on the objectives and whether it is for biodiversity. Research on non-natives lacks evidence on their ability to host non-natives for biodiversity."
 - d. Paragraph 8h – amend to "...whether carbon should be measured..." Need to explain what is meant regarding the paper not having to prove the carbon target.
 - e. Paragraph 8k – explain what delivery it is referring to.
 - f. Paragraph 8m – explain this sentence further.
 - g. Paragraph 8b – amend to reflect that the treescapes programme has agreed funding however the call out for fellows has not commenced yet.
4. The actions were reviewed:
 - a. Action 1 – complete.
 - b. Action 2 – complete.
 - c. Action 3 – no short note provided as a presentation on RD will be delivered later in this meeting.
 - d. Action 4 – Funding allocation will be confirmed in the next quarter once the business case has been approved by the investment committee in May.
 - e. Action 5 – There needs to be a link between the public face of NCF delivery (the web interface), and the RD element. Funding publication will be confirmed by communications once the business case is approved has been granted.
 - f. Action 6 – An update on monitoring and evaluation was provided by CW:
 - Theory of Change: There is now a full and established programme level theory of change, with an accompanying narrative including barriers and enablers drafted. Furthermore, there are four project level theories of change developed as nested within the broader programme level theory of change. Three of these have been completed in collaboration with colleagues across the Defra group in policy and delivery, with the remaining one a work in progress.
 - Data, KPIs, and baselines: A data mapping exercise has been conducted to look at the appropriate KPI metrics and reporting frequency to meet the objectives of the programme. As far as possible, existing data will be used

from sources such as NFI, Forest Research, and the PMO Dashboard, among others, and any data gaps will be identified and met as required.

- Evaluation: An evaluation programme is being drafted, to consider process, impact, and value for money level evaluation in accordance with magenta book guidelines. It will feature a mid-term evaluation (likely end 2022) and final evaluation. Currently work is being conducted on how it can be taken forward and operationalised.
- The scoping and design is an independent design done with PA Consulting, with a good level of discussion with Defra ALBs. It's moving at pace with challenges arising when drilling down to the appropriate level of granularity needed when looking at the future impacts of the programme.
 - A question was raised on whether TAW-SAG would get sight of the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) being posed, as there were queries on how measurable the KPI were. An update will be provided to TAW-SAG when appropriate.
 - A question on whether the consultants were liaising with stakeholders beyond the Defra and ALB community. The response was that engagement is currently within the Defra community. There would have to be careful consideration to ensure engagement outside is fair, but should TAW-SAG feel there should be others involved then flag this with DE and the ME team can investigate how it may be done. Devolved Administrations are kept abreast of progress through working groups.
- g. Action 7 - Complete. The work is continuing. Further feedback may be provided by MR following on from some workshops on protected areas that Natural England have commissioned from land use consultants.
- h. Action 8 – complete. May not be the final list and there may be questions but it's a starting point.
- i. Action 9 – complete.

Actions

1. Action 1: ChW to update last meeting's minutes to reflect the comments.
2. Action 2: DE feedback to NCF PMO the TAW-SAG recommendation to have coherent RD presentation on the web.
3. Action 3: DE will work out with ME team when documents are ready for bringing to TAW-SAG. This could be at the next meeting or through correspondence, depending on timings.

Item 3: Programme board update and feedback from Trees and Forestry Stakeholder Meeting

5. TAW-SAG paper 8 – NCF Board discussion paper was circulated prior to the meeting. The following comments were raised:
 - A point to note, that it mentions that a substantial amount of the funding should be put aside for research, but this should also include monitoring as there is often a need to get the correct monitoring in place.

- Should a further update be issued about urgent issues to flag as part of TAW-SAG's central mission to advise Defra?
 - There was a discussion covering the lack of emphasis on the outputs and consequences of planting trees, which planning should be focussed on for example, carbon, biodiversity, water quality, recreation, health and education. These things could be made better but also worse depending on where trees are planted. Not forgetting those who do not have access to woodlands and are financially unable to get out to them. TAW-SAG should be advising on all these areas.
 - Could the programme board give clarity on what it expects new woodland to produce in terms of timber and wood? What is the figure the board might be looking towards and what sort of production is more suited and best to go for? Some information on this, not necessarily targets, to have alongside the current biodiversity and carbon targets would be helpful. One of the core elements is the production of wood products but what does that really mean for forests to be productive?
 - There is a higher focus on woodland but should also focus on tree cover more generally, and 20% of tree cover is outside of woodland. The time spent discussing tree cover does not seem to be captured but it should not be forgotten.
 - Agree that woodland is needed but we must know what the trees are for. Targets might not be the way to go as it could end up with the wrong trees in the wrong place. A strategy of what geographically would fit where and would be priorities in different regions of the country, is needed. Net-Zero Plus is moving us in this direction but there's a need to keep focussed on this.
6. RMK provided feedback from the programme board. Key points raised were:
- The board has made clear it expects the programme to keep a relentless focus on carbon. The funding is targeted towards carbon sequestration, so TAW-SAG need to provide the very best, scientific advice for carbon as the key element. This does not mean ignoring the other areas.
 - Resilience is a priority. Particularly genetic resilience and resistance to floods and droughts and not forgetting the water quality and quantity issues.
 - Ensuring the external and internal delivery is matched.
 - The board gave thanks to the constructive challenge that has been given by TAW-SAG.
 - The chair of the programme board was particularly interested in vacant and derelict land (VDL) and how to access it and make it work. Especially around tax and the social issues around the take up of afforestation of VDL. Is there the right expertise on the panel or is someone required to come in as a guest to tell us about tax and other issues around VDL?
 - Ensuring good communication links between Defra and BEIS and understanding what they are doing and thinking particularly around their carbon sequestration calculations.
7. As most of the group were at the stakeholder meeting this wasn't discussed but people were able to provide feedback in the meeting's chat function.

Item 4: RD strategy presentation and discussion

8. CW presented a presentation on the RD strategy currently being drafted. It covered the following points:
 - a. The RD programme of work will contribute to planting the right trees in the right place and better manage existing woodlands to achieve a range of environmental outcomes, particularly climate change mitigation and biodiversity where there are or will be stretching statutory targets.
 - b. The work will include funding relevant ETAP actions and strategic objectives that current and potential future projects will address.
 - c. The strategy includes the current projects and potential projects that have been proposed.
 - d. Project proposals will be requested, reviewed and assessed against key priority areas and funding criteria before awarding funding.
 - e. Key priority areas for future RD will be:
 - a) ETAP actions
 - b) research interventions to facilitate programme monitoring and evaluation
 - c) evidence gaps which support project delivery
 - f. Four procurement options –
 - a) Engage a select number of ALBs using existing SLAs.
 - b) Engage all Defra ALBs that have a remit which overlaps with trees, woodland and forestry and use existing or new SLAs.
 - c) Develop an external tendering process open to competition.
 - d) Develop a hybrid approach where ALBs can commission external providers.
 - g. To ensure the greatest added value of the Trees and Forestry RD portfolio, the RD team will work collaboratively with other Defra teams and bodies working on woodlands and forestry to avoid duplication.

Summary key points raised in the discussion

Procurement options

- a. Preference for options 3 or 4 or a combination. With the hybrid approach you would get the best of academic rigor and independence alongside the ALB providing the practical relevance on the ground. However, timing could be an issue as they may take a long time to set up.
- b. Further reflection is required to provide advice on priorities. Members can provide feedback via email once slides have been issued.
- c. Information on who is currently doing the projects would be useful, with the academic institutions for each research project.
- d. From the UK treescapes procurement, there were around 80, in-depth, proposals which cover a lot of the action points and objectives. There is a huge wealth of

knowledge and expertise so procurement option 3 would be a strategic approach to allow that wider community to be taken advantage of.

- e. There is a need to build on capacity, in both the ALBs and the wider network. Particularly on carbon and these need to be long-term field research. This needs to run through the commissioning as well.
- f. A fifth option could be included which involves UKRI could be considered. Defra would need to have a strong steer over what is funded so UKRI keep it strategically relevant. UKRI have a very effective tendering process and good processes for scientific oversight and ensuring scientific excellence in what happens.
- g. There needs to be assessment of scientific excellence on proposals, not just strategic relevance.

Prioritisation

- h. What is not captured are the baselines. When talking about the carbon benefits of tree planting, understanding the current baseline is critical.
- i. A lot of the action points are very well aligned to the UK treescapes programme so there needs to be joined up thinking around identifying what is already being funded. The second lot of projects will be coming through in June so further conversations will happen then to ensure work is not duplicated.
- j. An understanding of the multiple consequences of planting different areas with different species is needed. Additionally, how to incentivise landowners in those key areas. How much do you need to pay in those different areas? How do you tackle problems such as tenanted farms?

Action 4

ChW to send out a copy of the slides to enable further reflection and comments.

Item 5: Presentation from the Centre for Forest Protection (CFP)

9. CT presented on the CFP and covered the following points:
 - Addresses ETAP action 3.1.
 - Its mission: To protect the future of our forests, woodlands and trees from environmental and socio-economic threats, through the provision of innovative science, interdisciplinary research, expert advice and training – across the UK and internationally.
 - A collaborative hub, led by Forest Research and Kew, which brings together tree health expertise from the UK and the rest of the world, in the joint creation of knowledge and research to protect and enhance the future health and resilience of our forests and woodlands and trees.
 - Three key activity areas:
 - a) scoping and strategic development of the CFP.
 - b) initiating the science programme.
 - c) scoping and developing the education, training and outreach package – academic, professional and technical.

- The scope of work in the first 3 years will focus primarily on biotic threats (such as, pests and diseases) with a longer-term strategy to widen the research programme to include abiotic (for example, climate change, fire, wind or degradation of soils) and socioeconomic and anthropogenic threats to trees (for example, neglect, loss of woodlands and forests to development or removal of vulnerable tree species).
- CFP research themes – resistance, response and recovery and adaptation.

Key points for TAW-SAG

- All thoughts on the concept and strategic planning to date welcome, particularly guidance on the USP of this centre.
- Would TAW-SAG like a role in evaluation of the research programme, either at the current selection phase or mid-term?

Summary of key points raised in discussion

- When looking at pests and pathogens, this includes trade as well as climate change and all causes.
- The centre will cover all social sciences as well as natural sciences but perhaps economics is a perspective that needs to come into the adaptation research.
- Being reactive to the knowledge gained is a challenge. A portfolio approach to planning the future woodlands would incorporate the uncertainty and risk. This is trying to be done within the plant health portfolio with the tree health resilience strategy and plant health risk register.
- How will the CFP interact with the Centre for Forest Management and Climate Change (CFMCC), or are they seen as separate entities? The CFMCC is a proposed project with the ambition to produce a more holistic and collaborative approach.
- Need to also look at tree species for our future woods. Both in terms of a conservation perspective and the production perspective, and they may not be the same. And impacts of multiple interactions (diseases and climate change).
- Linking up with the Environment Agency is important for water health and quality.
- There is a link to the Forestry Skills Forum, fellowships and internships would be a way of getting inward flow of expertise and perspective from external organisations.
- TAW-SAG content to undertake a mid-term review.
- Slides to be sent to the group for comments on the ranked projects in the next couple of weeks.

Action 5

ChW to send out a copy of CFP slides to enable further reflection and comments.

Item 6: Any other business (AOB)

10. PB followed up with the issue of a lack of certainty of EU funding for research projects is undermining our capacity as a country to deliver some research projects.
11. CW invited individuals from TAW-SAG to present on a relevant trees topic at upcoming Natural Environment Trees and Landscapes (NETL) Birdtable talks. This would be in the form of a 15-minute virtual presentation. All are welcome. If anyone would like to please let us know through the TAW-SAG mailbox.

Trees and Forestry, Strategy Engagement and Analysis Team March 2022