

Trees and Woodland Scientific Advisory Group (TAW-SAG) meeting 8 minutes: 10 May 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
- **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
- **Maggie Roe** (MR) - Landscape Planning Research and Policy Engagement, University of Newcastle
- **Yadvinder Malhi** (YM) - Ecosystems Research, Environmental Change Institute, Oxford University
- **Daniel Doherty** (DD) – Head of Forestry Policy, Defra
- **Jasmeet Phagoora** (JP) – Senior Research Officer, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E), Defra
- **John Hales** (JH) – Consultant, Evidence and Analysis for Trees and Forestry, DEFRA
- **Sam Ralph** (SR) – Vacant and Derelict Land Policy Lead
- **Clare Williams** (CW) – Evidence and Analysis Team for Trees and Forestry, Defra
- **Charlotte Williams** (ChW) (secretary – took minutes), Research and Development (RD) Project Delivery Advisor, Defra

Apologies

- **Julie Urquhart** (JU) - Environmental Social Science at University of Gloucestershire
- **Richard Buggs** (RB) – (Observer), Kew Gardens, Plant Health Group
- **Daisy Ellis** (DE) - Head of Strategy, Engagement and Analysis, Defra
- **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 eighth meeting of the TAW-SAG.

Item 2: Review and agree minutes

2. The minutes of the last meeting were reviewed. The group were content with the minutes with no amendments required.
3. The actions were reviewed:
 - a) Action 1 – complete.
 - b) Action 2 – DE provide an update for next meeting.
 - c) Action 3 – complete.
 - d) Action 4 – complete.
 - e) Action 5 – complete.

Action 1

DE to provide feedback on Action 2 for the next meeting.

Item 3: Programme Board (PB) update

4. RMK provided an update on some current out of cycle correspondence on 2 topics:
 - a) There are tensions between granting licences to afforest and conservation of wading birds. It was agreed with the Chair of Natural England's Science Advisory Committee that there will be a subgroup to discuss and provide feedback on these issues. KK and RM are also a part of this group.
 - b) There have also been discussions on the topic of extending, or making full use of, the available time for planting trees. Thank you to CQ and JU for stepping forward and contributing to those discussions.
 - A question was asked about whether the current shift in seasons due to climate change has already shortened the tree planting season and whether this will be considered? RMK confirmed that this will be considered.
5. JP provided an update from the PB on ME including the following points:
 - a) The board signed off the top 3 areas for measurement:
 - carbon sequestration
 - biodiversity
 - and the monitoring of tree planting
 - b) The level of ambition for the evaluation will be determined by the cost of the RD proposed.
 - c) Thank you to all those members that provided feedback on the framework. These documents have now been finalised. More detail was added around the qualitative research required for the evaluation and how it will be carried out. And some indicators have been further developed.
 - d) The indicators that need further evidence and research, which will be detailed in the RD strategy, are:
 - Biodiversity

- Air Quality
- Flooding
- Public access to woodland
- Public health and wellbeing benefits from woodland
- Forestry skills and workforce
- Carbon sequestration
- Landowner experiences

Summary of key points raised in the discussion

- a) A question was raised around whether the ME team had been in contact with the Department for Education (DFE) when carrying out a review of skills needs for the green economy and were making recommendations. There is a need for people with the right forestry skills up to level 4. DD confirmed that they had engaged with DFE. They have introduced a GCSE in Natural History, and Forestry Commission are launching an apprenticeship programme.
- b) It was raised that EUFORGEN have done previous work developing indicators to monitor genetic diversity. This might be helpful for biodiversity.
- c) A point was raised around what indicators were not working for biodiversity and whether the Nature Scot Indices could help.

Action 2

PT to share the DFE contacts to DD for the ME work.

Action 3

JP and JH to discuss with Daisy when to update TAW-SAG next.

Item 4: Vacant and Derelict Land (VDL) Presentation

6. SR provided an update on the VDL project and why it's taking place. The key points were:
 - a) Land scarcity is a challenge for the England Tree Planting Programme. It's not that there is not enough land it's how to get enough farmers to provide some of their land for woodland creation.
 - b) There's a need to reduce pressure on green field land where we can, particularly we don't want to use land that's more suitable for agriculture. There's an opening for a bespoke, innovative new offer to target barriers to planting on this type of land.
 - c) The scheme's aim is to use targeted public funding to tip the balance in favour of woodland creation on VDL, for both landowners and investors.
 - d) It's difficult to quantify how much VDL there is as local authorities define it differently. Based on mapping work and engagement with landowners, it's believed there is a significant amount. Planting 5,000 hectares of woodland should be achievable.

- e) The project uses four categories to define VDL:
 - a) Vacant Land – non-damaged land but with non-physical barriers such as poor access.
 - b) Derelict Land - damaged land that needs soil amelioration.
 - c) Neglected Land - poor quality grassland that has had some restoration but has no beneficial outcomes.
 - d) Contaminated Land – this is excluded from the project.
- f) Barriers to woodland creation on VDL –
 - a) Lack of knowledge and understanding of the benefits.
 - b) Currently no offer currently good enough to change the land use.
 - c) Uncertainty over regulatory processes.
 - d) Soil quality.
 - e) It's more expensive than planting on greenfield land.
- g) The project will outsource the requirement to an external delivery partner to bring in investment alongside delivering the restoration of VDL and woodland creation.
- h) It will provide a flexible funding offer; a staged pathway with best practice for site restoration; and a supportive regulatory environment that attracts investment and reduces barriers.
- i) The project is aiming to launch Winter of 2022 to 2023.

Summary of key points raised in the discussion

Biodiversity

- a. Derelict sites can naturally acquire a high biodiversity and there's an important need to protect and safeguard that.
- b. A point was raised about how this links with Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and whether this could be an alternative mechanism, rather than Nature for Climate funding. Although this would be a good mechanism, a problem with BNG is that it ties the assumed net gain next to, or even on the development site which is not favourable from a biodiversity perspective. It needs to move away from that idea and target it to a place where, for example, it could build up a network of biodiversity and conservation sites. It is recognised that VDL sites are not development sites so this would only apply if they were tied to offsite developments.
- c. From a biodiversity perspective, there's a need to ensure there's no loss of high biodiversity sites for something of lower biodiversity. The uniqueness of the habitat matters so part of the solution could be not to focus on tree planting but facilitated natural regeneration, which supports the inherent biodiversity and not covering up the habitat.
- d. It is important to note that, for any solution, the biodiversity net gain is not constrained to be inside the development red line.
- e. Engagement with landowners was specified however it is expected that engagement would be wider than just the landowners themselves.

- f. SR confirmed that as part of the scope for the scheme, it will aim for land that is both economically and ecologically degraded. And included in the process will be environmental impact assessments and detailed ecology assessments.
- g. The group was asked if any members wanted to sit on the advisory group to look at the staged pathway in detail and provide advice?

Social

- j) Need to recognise that any methodology recognises the huge environmental and socio-economic variation across locations, and those prior conditions need assessing in each project, both in the environmental domain and the human being domain.
- k) Will there be any consideration for what the local community want? Some local communities don't favour woodland as they feel less safe. Would there be a loss of recreational space? SR confirmed that community engagement is an important part of the stage pathway.
- l) Need to be careful about what we're paying for and when and not pay lots of money upfront.

Action 4

DD to raise within Defra, the point raised at 8b) highlighting the issue with BNG.

Action 5

SR comeback to TAW-SAG to present the staged pathway.

Item 5: The right place for the right tree for 'net zero plus' woodlands: paper summary

- 7. IB presented on the paper he was involved in on the right place for the right tree for net zero plus. The key points were:
 - a) Highlights the need to reject 'single issue' decision making for land use and recognise that land generates positives and negatives every time it's changed.
 - b) It introduces the 'natural capital' approach that identifies the variation in the environment and the economy and therefore what's done where makes a big difference. This will enable us to not perfect forestry decisions but improve them.
 - c) It highlights three policy goals: sustainability, efficiency, and equity. These all relate to 3 government policy areas which woodlands is central to: BNG, public money for public goods, and levelling up.
 - d) Climate change significantly affects tree growth and investment, and this will change over time.
 - e) It needs to be recognised that there is a substantial trade-off between carbon storage and managing for maximum timber output.
 - f) When looking at the storage of carbon, there's a need to look not just at what's happening above ground but what's happening under the soil, and what's

happening to the products. This makes a difference to the extent to which trees are helping carbon long term.

- g) There's a need to recognise the albedo effect, and that planting woodlands, particularly conifers, on an area that's got high reflectivity will lower that and cause local warming.
- h) Mixed woodland and conifer woodland, also have biodiversity attributes as well, and should not be ignored.
- i) Trees themselves are increasingly under threat as the intensity of disease and pest attacks increase over time.
- j) Recreation and physical health is a huge potential benefit from woodlands but the problem that needs addressing is that the woodlands are not near to where people live.
- k) There are costs to creating woodlands. One is the foregone agricultural production if we're using certain types of land for forestry. This would result in more imports and lead to carbon leakage – exporting our carbon emissions which can result in losses of important biodiversity in countries that supply those imports. These costs should be considered with the many benefits, over time, when making decisions on land use change.

Summary of key points raised in discussion

- How do you start applying this to looking at trade-offs between different types of biodiversity? It would be good to see an example of where this would come out saying not to plant trees on that site.
- The costs perhaps were not explored in the paper as evenly as the benefits. The carbon losses from the soil from tree planting did not come out as strongly as they could have done.
- The conservation sector is a single focus group and needs to get better at helping other sectors find the compromise.
- The carbon issue is tied up with what the trees are being used for at the end. But there's a need to expand this and look at the lifetime of the product

Action 5

ChW to send out a copy of the comments issued in the chat for response.

Item 6: Any other business (AOB)

8. None

Trees and Forestry, Strategy Engagement and Analysis Team May 2022