

Ref: AFG 04/22

AFG Minutes: 23/6/2022**Location:** Webinar/teleconference**Chair:** Joe Watts**Secretary:** Katie Booth**Attendees****AFG Members:**Nick Phillips (Woodland Trust) **NP**Neil Douglas (RSPB) **ND**Neville Elstone (Cumbria Woodlands) **NE**Paul Orsi (Sylva) **POr**Graham Clark (CLA) **GC**David Lewis (RICS) **DL**Graham Garratt (ICF) **GG**Caroline Ayre (Confor) **CA**Julian Ohlsen (SW AFG) **JO**Claire Douglas (RPA) **CD**Poppy Sherborne (NFU) **PS**Jackie Dunne (Confor) **JD**Cheryl Lundberg (RFS) **CL**James Russell (Community Forests) **JR****FC/Defra:**Alec Rhodes (FC) **AR**Joe Watts (FC) **JW**Melanie Edgar (FC) **ME**Ian Tubby (FC) **IT**Rory Lunny (Defra) **RL**Katie Booth (FC) **KB**Samantha Malpass (FC) **SM**Mark Broadmeadow (FC) **MB**Chris Watson (FC) **CW**Alex Holsgrove (FC) **AH**Lucy Wyatt (FC) **LW**Jemma Snoxell (Defra) **JS**John Powell (FC) **JP****Apologies:**

Steph Rhodes (FC)

Barnaby Coupe (Wildlife Trust)

Adrian Sherwood (RPA)

John Blessington (Local Government)

Ian Baker (Small Woods)

Adrian Jowitt (Natural England)

Clive Thomas (Soil Association)

Brian Fraser (HTA)

AFG Minutes

Welcome

JW opened the session and welcomed all.

Promotion and Engagement Update

LW presented the slides.

GG commented in the chat that it was great to see proactive engagement with farmers and landowners and that “Generally, there is a void of information and a lack of understanding as to what is happening running into ELMS, so a really good time for FC to raise profile and build external relationships”.

Also in the chat, **NE** queried “I don't understand how the FC can refer on to the private sector/engo's and Com[munity] Forests?”.

CD does similar work as part of a stakeholder engagement role in RPA, who have been involved with various agricultural shows and events. At the Royal Show in Cornwall one noticeable thing was a joint presence with Defra FFCP. There is a lot of interest in how things join up, SFI (Sustainable Farming Initiative) and CS (Countrywide Stewardship) and how EWCO (England Woodland Creation Offer) fits. CD queried if FC has thought about joining with that effort from Defra and RPA.

LW completely agrees that join up is key and confirmed that yes, we are partnering with RPA and Defra at events, although not all. Groundswell this week is a joint Defra group event with Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs).

CA noted in the chat that “We've invited RPA/Defra to forestry event, i.e. the APF”.

NE queried how referrals are made to Community Forests (CFs) and how the government can push back out to the private sector without grace or favour.

LW confirmed that FC cannot pass on to private agents, but rather refers to delivery partners within the NCF. There is a triage framework to help staff field the enquiry appropriately. If the query is around a particular location, then it may be more appropriate for a CF, for example, to speak to them. This process is not automated currently and is down to individuals.

CL raised in the chat that “[it would be] useful to have the Woodland Creation Officer (WCO) role clarified as there have instances of being told we won't be recommended to

potential clients where we do not recommend Woodland Creation Planning Grant”. **CL** confirmed that this feedback has come directly from colleagues, and the perception is that there is little value in going through the Woodland Creation Planning Grant (WCPG) process. The seems to conflict with what the WCO role is.

LW acknowledged this and noted that the WCPG will be covered later. **LW** also agreed that the WCO role is not necessarily what you have outlined but if we can make WCPG more palatable that should make a difference in it being recommended.

JO commented that it is good to be selling woodland creation, but the problem is that we set the ball rolling and create pent up demand, and then are simply not delivering it in terms of processing applications. **JO** queried how are FC selling timescales and commented on the need to ‘be careful what you wish for’.

LW confirmed FC is careful to try not to sell expectations, and advised the team is working with **SM** on a piece of content about timelines to give people an indicator so we have something to refer people to, so they understand it will not be a couple of months. We do not publish timescales as it is so hard to be concrete but there is awareness that we cannot set high expectations.

JD echoed **JO**’s comments and added that it is not just expectations of the timeline, which is ridiculous at the moment, but also expectations of the level of funding you will get. Some of the bite size things put out mean people think they are going to get £10k a hectare for everything. **JD** also noted that the materials say to speak to your local WCO or one of your partners. The WCOs are there just to do WCPG, so it should perhaps refer your WO not WCO. **JD** also queried the reference to ‘one of our partners’, to ask if that includes them.

LW responded to confirm that £10k is a true value, as the average payment is higher than that but acknowledged that it does not include costs and that this has been fed back into Defra. The reference to partner means the FC’s Nature for Climate Fund (NCF) partners.

GG commented that the presentation spoke about not wishing to promote woodland creation without management and raised the issues around WCPG applications. This year, **GG** applied for a site he has been managing for years. It took 30 hours to apply for the grant and the level of administration is out of proportion to the benefit. The detailed mapping exercise at the start before you have secured funding feels inappropriate.

JW asked for clarification of whether it took 30 hours to apply or to do the work involved. **GG** confirmed 30 hour’s work and three tries to get a successful application.

ACTION: JW will pick up the WMP Grant application issue with **GG** offline, as it should not take that long.

JD confirmed it is getting the sites mapped and registered often that takes the time, to get something acceptable to the Rural Payments Agency (RPA).

GG raised that mapping larger land parts can be an endless task. It would be preferable to be able to give an approximate amount when applying and then provide the detail later in the process. **JW** acknowledged the comments and will take the issue offline to address.

CA referenced in the chat the need to clarify who is meant by the NCF partners.

NE added that there is a piece of work to do so an applicant can see what the potential next steps are and that will need to involve the private sector and noted in the chat that "Took a poll with Com[munity] Forests across England, less than 10 referrals nationally. We need to give some thought about wider referrals, had a different response from one regional team. Need to be at least guide folk to next steps, which surely has to include private sector. Perhaps something take off line with a smaller focus group".

LW thanked all for the comments, but there is a challenge in that we cannot have a directory. Having said this, the point is taken and will be considered.

JW asked if we reference in the next steps engaging a forestry agent in generic terms.

LW confirmed we do reference a range of sources.

SM advised in the chat that "The guide to planning new woodland does advise engaging a forestry agent (no names)".

CA advised you could reference the existing directories put together by the sector.

JD raised in the chat that "I presume all the partners have a good base of forestry knowledge and understanding of UKFS to not only plant a woodland but establish it well to produce a woodland that is a woodland".

SM clarified that by partners we mean funding partners (conduits for money).

EWCO Update

SM presented the slides.

GG suggested in the chat that "Possibly a lot of small applications because funding and admin now attractive for marginal land conversion and where people are minded to plant

but not enough to attract larger areas where land use change is required in competition with other land use options”.

JD enquired whether you have been able to get an idea of what is causing the schemes that are taking the longest to take so long – are there any trends? **JD** advised of one 45 ha site that has been with FC for 8 months. It went through the WCPG, so had been rubber stamped but seems to be getting caught up in the complexity of additional contributions.

SM advised that area teams have been surveyed on the 90 oldest outstanding cases to identify the cause of delay, next step and how confident they are that planting will happen this winter, but we are seeing quite a lot of variation. **SM** advised we should not be seeing issues with additional contributions, as all area staff have just been retrained on the rules and so this should not be seen in future. **SM** will share the results of the survey when it is finished.

ACTION: SM to share the results of the area team survey on the oldest outstanding EWCO cases with the AFG once available.

JD queried how quickly the first step should happen when a scheme comes in and added more detail in the chat “Took 4 months for the WO to visit the EWCO application which was an approved WCPG and is 45ha. At 8 months I am still waiting with baited breath”.

SM advised it should take two weeks or less to assign to a WO. The average is three weeks, but we want to get that shorter. Area teams should take 2-3 months to look at them.

JO commented that the timescales do not seem right. **JO** has had schemes where it has taken three months to get an application acknowledged, although he understands the factors mentioned. **JO** queried if WCPG applications could be fast tracked, and we aim for the low hanging fruit, as targets will not be hit at this rate.

SM confirmed that the team are currently prioritising, to optimise service (though priorities are not fixed and are regularly reviewed). This prioritisation is currently 1 for WCPG, 2 for anything over a certain number of hectares, then everything else. **SM** also confirmed the hope that applications not being acknowledged for a long time is no longer occurring, as the level of administrative staff has been doubled and applications have been turned round much quicker this spring. The team is in a better place now than ten months ago.

JO added that the professionals can help get applications right first time to fly them through, and everyone needs to be pulling in the same direction.

SM acknowledged this and that to help, everyone should continue to socialise the handy hints and webinar to highlight most common reasons for return.

ND questioned why the administration involved would be roughly the same regardless of the scheme size and queried if prior notification and EIA are included in plans to streamline administrative checks and processes.

SM clarified it does not include anything the WO does, but rather means any checks on the application form, on any other grants on the land, and due diligence. This is what is being considered for streamlining, so it is more proportional.

NP found the presentation interesting and commented that the analysis is the most detailed seen so far and very helpful. **NP** supports several of the options, a in particular (Apply a 3 ha minimum application area) as it is good to send a signal we want larger schemes. This is also good if the government wants to attract private finance, as currently EWCO could be competing and this gives a sufficient split, so should lead to a win-win situation and be more efficient.

SM commented on the need for FC to manage expectations with the AFG, as this is the option that is most politically challenging. Part of the ethos of EWCO is that it is broad, so there would need to be a strong case to make if we wish to exclude anyone from being able to apply, so we are exploring this, but it would not be within our gift to unilaterally make this change without Ministerial approval.

NP raised the hope that ministers would want to attract private finance and not displace it.

JO commented on suggestions to get the average application size increased, suggesting that EWCO could pay a higher rate of grant per tree for schemes about 10-200 ha. **JO** also queried an issue with EWCO raised by several colleagues around claims and the requirement for receipted invoices for work having been completed, and whether this has changed.

SM advised that this now only applies for actual cost items (infrastructure), invoices no longer must be provided as a matter of course with every claim for standard cost items (e.g. trees), but must be provided if requested. **JO** acknowledged this and that it was a big problem, so it is good to see the changes and they will be fed back to clients.

GG queried the gold club member suggestion and whether, based on the number of applications being received currently, it warrants setting up an additional administrative structure, and noted a concern about taking resource away from smaller applications. An

egalitarian viewpoint suggests there should be an efficient, solution throughout to be fair to all.

SM acknowledged the comments and that this is part of the thinking. **JW** added that while FC cannot pay premium prices, it could possibly provide a premium service but noted GG's input.

JD welcomed all the analysis and work to identify blockers, what is working and what is not, as this is vital. **JD** added that it is important to not stop moving things forward for small things such as missing SBIs or CRNs that will be resolved over time. **JD** also raised the concern that sending things back to a client could be seen as a way of managing internal workloads. **JD** also raised some issues around additional contributions and basing sub compartments based on these is not a good idea. Woodlands are designed based on land features and constraints, not around additional contributions. It is the wrong approach if these cannot be deployed and mapped for applicants. If WCPG has already been applied for then the additional contributions information is far too late in the process. Streamlining is needed between WCPG and EWCO as the gap between the two is now a chasm rather than just a bit tricky.

JD also raised concern about the biodiversity information in the recent E-alert, and the risk involved with expecting paperwork for trees that may come from multiple sources and may be dealt with by a contractor. This is a risk for client and agent as papers are asked for when claiming.

SM acknowledged the comments and will take all this back to the teams as there is no time to go into it during the meeting.

CL gave feedback in the chat as follows, "Welcome the feedback on evidence to allow materials etc to be purchased ahead - thank you. Some collective feedback from RFS members/associates in relation the recent changes to nature recovery element:

1. The announcement was/is poorly timed, with limited ability to respond to existing applications and creating commercial challenges
2. The changes will have a negative impact on achieving planting targets and carbon sequestering potential
3. Culture within defra needs to look inwards to encourage landowners to plant trees, not to discourage by further complex conditions
4. The new conditions do not take into account climate change and disease, as demonstrated by the FCF/GiB AND it appears the new scheme has not considered the excellent Ecological Site Classification system, ESC,
5. The criteria changes have a significant impact as above on climate change, resilience, and carbon sequestration, all key government targets."

JD added in the chat that "...not all less than 3ha fit other partner schemes".

GG acknowledged in the chat that there is “Really good work focusing on resolving system blockages”.

CA commented on the presentation talking about different perspectives and agree that we need to work together, acknowledging the need for larger schemes and helping to make this happen. **CA** raised that there used to be regional AFGs and there is a struggle to have time to discuss issue fully in this forum. **CA** suggested that it may be time to have regional groups back again to discuss applications and get sector input.

JW confirmed that there are still some regional groups such as the Northern Professionals Group and FC will take this away and reflect on it.

JW queried if the FWACs could provide some of the solution and **CA** advised they cannot, and there is a need for more dialogue about this.

NE agreed in the chat that “Dialog at a sub-regional level needs to be maxed out. Improve the one team approach. Seems to have been lots of cases presented today that could be + with improved debate/engagement. It’s almost like sub regional AFG type event for your gold card agents, those who are bringing forward most schemes”.

PS welcomed the changes but raised that change can cause more confusion. Excluding sites under three hectares could potentially reduce opportunities for marginalised areas, which is fine if they are picked up elsewhere, maybe by EWCO ‘lite’. **PS** would welcome this and is also glad that deer control is being referenced provided it is tied up with other thinking and funding on the subject.

SM confirmed that it is, there is a policy lead for deer who works at a strategic level, and this is coming from him, so we are informed and joined up.

DL echoed concern over raising the minimum size, as there are good opportunities for farmers to have schemes on awkward areas, but these typically amount to small areas. These farmers generally have less access to direct advice and sites between 1-3 hectares are not eligible for WCPG, so **DL** supports a simplified scheme for the smaller sites.

DL is sad to hear 1–3-hectare sites are put in the lowest priority and raised the issues that these schemes may be the first time those farmers and their representatives have interacted with the FC. This could frustrate good intentions to put more trees on farms.

DL does not feel there should be higher rates for larger schemes as smaller schemes will cost more per hectare and can make an important contribution. DL appreciates they

can be admin heavy for FC and for the agent possibly, which means professional costs could also be a higher percentage.

SM acknowledged these comments, and this is the reason for EWCO 'lite', to make it easier for everyone. **SM** went on to comment that the team's priorities are not fixed, they will change, so please do not take it that we do not care about small schemes.

JR commented in the chat that "EWCO 'lite' should adopt a risk-based approach, keeping admin very light touch (think WGSmk3) and obligations clear and simple".

This was acknowledged to be the ambition by **SM** while noting that "the broader world of government grant standards and requirements has changed a lot since WGS - something for us to navigate and balance with the need to make EWCO as easy as possible".

AR also acknowledged all the comments in the chat and added a response on additional contributions and sub compartments as follows, "on sub-compartments we are only asking that riparian buffers are mapped separately because they have such unique design requirements (also that to follow UKFS these areas will tend to warrant their own cpt/sub compartment – maybe that was optimistic!). Otherwise, it is up to the applicants to set the cpt. boundaries as they see fit".

Later in the meeting **AR** added in the chat "looking at the latest information it looks like we are now acknowledging applications in three days and referring applications to Woodland Officer within a week (where applicant comes back with any missing information promptly). As Sam noted though we need to look at how hard a line we need to hold on passing applications forward where there is missing information".

Changes to the Woodland Carbon Code additionality tests

MB presented slides.

NE queried in the chat "How often will income foregone be reviewed, just thinking BPS".

PO noted in the chat that "The guy from Scottish Forestry on the ICF members hour this morning, said all costs and incomes would be updated annually".

JW advised we do not have the option now for people to voluntarily reduce their grant but there is work in progress on this.

GG queried whether there is new evidence available to support the modelling of broadleaf into 4-6 categories, or if it is relying on old evidence. **GG** added that it seems to be lacking in ambition.

MB clarified that there is a difference between what you get from carbon within the WCC and what the automatic assumptions are that are incorporated as revenue in the additionality test. For example, if you have yield class 12 sycamore you would have carbon projections associated with that, but the additionality tests will be trying to establish what the income will be. Another example is Sitka Spruce, as there is only one option and **MB** is in discussion on this, as a yield class of 24, with 2m spacing, that is clear felled at 38 has timber revenues based on that. That would apply to the additionality test rather than any carbon projections, which are a lot more sophisticated.

GG would like to understand more of the context, as does not fully understand. Are we still expecting new woodlands in this scenario to only provide yield class in line with standards? This will fail as it will be mis-representing the revenue stream if relying on the standard yield classes.

JD queried in the chat "So it's not using ESC projections? We have to provide the YC?".

ND queried if he understood correctly that the additionality test is not using the same carbon assumptions as the code does.

MB confirmed this is correct and **ND** wondered why not just use the same calculations?

MB advised it is primarily for reasons of simplicity but will go back to the WCC team on that point.

JW acknowledged it can take time to understand.

ELM Update

ME presented the slides and requested feedback.

JW advised that with some categories of options the tree items can be hidden inside, so there is a need to be careful that, as a group, we do not miss things being discussed that may have impact on trees.

NE highlighted the sector agricultural transition working group, which is regularly meeting, and Defra's reticence in engaging with that group (although it was noted that Richard Beddard has been very engaging). It feels as if it almost needs to be the other way round, as the information is so dense, with Defra proofing what it wants to do against forestry with the working group, as we have a broad membership to provide feedback.

ME noted these comments and that there has been some challenge in getting Defra out to groups and will also feedback to Richard.

JD raised if it is possible for the team to advise when it includes forestry and woodland, as it is so big and covers so much, so it is hard to know where to look and what will be of benefit to clients. It is difficult to start to ask questions as **JD** does not know where to start.

ME acknowledged this and that it has been a struggle to identify the best way to proceed. If the overwhelming feedback is for **ME** to go through the working groups and highlight where trees are mentioned, then this can be done. There may be some who are less comfortable with **ME** taking the lead so a blend of the two approaches is possible.

PO commented on the slide three categories, noting that surely wildlife/biodiversity, are involved in all the different options.

ME acknowledged this and advised that the category names were not hers.

AH feels like wildlife/biodiversity is a miscellaneous group and acknowledged there was perhaps a little laziness in naming, and there is not a lot in scope for forestry and woodland. It feels like a catch-all for things that do not fit elsewhere. **AH** advised there may be some scrub options in there, but this is still being worked on with Natural England.

NP queried where trees outside woodland or agroforestry sit, such as those on parkland, ancient woodlands, wood pasture etc. There is a need to make sure these do not fall between the gaps.

AH acknowledged **NP** is right and the themes do not work well for forestry. Ancient and veteran trees will be in woodlands, and quite a lot of trees are found under that category. Agroforestry covers a spectrum including woodland pasture.

CA commented on the fantastic job done to cover so many differing interests, but the team now need to get across how these categories all fit together. It is how they sit together and not just how forestry fits in that needs work.

ME advised there are representatives from **AH**'s team and Richard Pain's team involved to raise these things. If you do receive an invite to any stakeholder groups, please get involved if you can feed in. **ME** also added that trees that interact with water can be found in the riparian group and upland planting in the moorland group.

ME will send link to everyone that works and will also provide **KB** with a plan to circulate.

ACTION: ME to provide a plan to **KB** for circulation to the group.

RL noted that he is working with Richard, speaking every day, and that woodlands includes hedgerows as well.

PS advised that colleagues from the NFU have been working closely on this and queried if species management is just deer and squirrel or if it is wider.

AH advised it has not kicked off yet so the scope has yet to be defined but it will likely include rhododendron. **AH** invited **PS** to get in touch with suggestions for inclusion in species management.

Restocking – ideas for our September meeting

IT presented the slides.

NE raised in the chat “What can we learn from Scotland, is it worth getting FS (realise its wrong) Scotland and private sector Scotland for lessons learnt. they have been running a scheme for last 7 years or so”.

IT advised that there will be a substantive discussion in September, but now the team is looking for evidence of failure, and initial reactions to confirm if the right questions are being asked and the right assumptions being made, as well as help with the organisation of the session for September.

JW invited the group’s thoughts on the topic and facilitation of the September session.

GG raised that, with regards to natural regeneration, a longer time frame should be allowed for ecological succession and not just rushing back to close canopy. **GG** also raised the issue that the state holds regulatory power to compel people to do something with private assets, but for most, this power came in after they bought the asset/s. **GG** therefore believes it is not unreasonable for the state to contribute or compensate for compelled action, and this philosophical aspect needs considering. Timber sales are the owner’s return on their previous investment. To be compelled to spend money on the next crop (where a farmer is never required to plant a new cereal crop, for example) feels unjust and as if the state should contribute.

JW advised these thoughts are what we need to discuss at length in September and would appreciate thoughts on how we facilitate this.

NP feels there should be a focus on outcomes and fitting with wider ELM. We may spend time talking about activities but need it to fit with the all-encompassing vehicle. **NP** is

pleased to see PAWS there and considering different types of sites will be important, as UKFS does not cover all. It is very timely.

GC is glad the group is discussing this, and it is being considered. Lots of the wider reasons being given are a good idea and **GC** agrees with the pay offs, which are appropriate.

CA queried a proposed Northumberland WCP pilot restock scheme for Storm Arwen. **IT** advised this is still under live discussion but there is interest.

CA added that if we could have a management plan for restocking that would help longevity.

NE suggested that we could learn from Scotland and could try and get a speaker from the private sector and Forestry Scotland to give their top tips and learn what uptake was like.

JD noted in the chat, "I think focusing on restocking for resilience following the storms definitely could be supported. My client raised this with FC, CLA and CONFOR after Storm Arwen".

ND also noted interest from a PAWS perspective in the chat.

JW confirmed we will take those who have commented as being interested in being involved with helping with the session.

WCPG Review

JP presented the slides.

JW advised the team will try to make demands on the group's time as little as possible and there has been further feedback on WCPG earlier this meeting that we will feedback to **JP**.

JO is keen to help, holiday and workload notwithstanding. **JO** raised that the biggest issue is that the EIA process cannot start until a site is out of the planning grant stage. It needs to start in part one and be more seamless.

JP advised this has been raised in the past and is prevalent in the EWCO paper, especially around duplication and restarting the clock. The team is keen to look at this and make the transaction as smooth as possible.

NP welcomes relaxing the threshold for the planning grant if the EWCO threshold stays the same. **NP** also raised that costs are high for some smaller schemes, especially where breeding waders are involved, so some support in those areas from the governance and target point of view is important, and wondered if this something that is being considered or if it has been discounted.

JW confirmed the FC is looking at everything within limits, including payment rates and thresholds.

GG noted in the chat that "Increasing payment rates for WCPG Phase 1 would be helpful, but not if it premised an increased application obligation".

JD noted a diagram detailing a suggested approach has been created that could be sent to the team if of interest. **JD** went on to note that there may be a hangover from when WCPG first started, and it was used as an exploratory tool to see if woodland creation could be done. Thinking needs to change to embed it as part of the design process. For larger schemes, stage one is not required as that work is done by the time it gets to FC. Smaller schemes may need more help. Stage one could involve applying for EWCO and looking at constraints, then stage two could be applied for. Smaller schemes with earlier support at stage one could just go straight through. There are different ways this could be done, and we need to throw some things out of the box to see how we put them back in the box.

JW confirmed this is an important grant and we need it to work, so value the group's input into reshaping and refining it.

CA queried if some other members could contribute also. **JW/AR** confirmed this would be welcome and we can provide some text to give to them.

ACTION: AR to provide some text to explain the WCPG review and invite input from additional members and provide this to **CA** and any other interested parties.

ND also confirmed others in LINK may be interested and offered to send it to them.

JR advised in the chat "I would recommend engaging Gareth Price (ex-FC and forestry/landscape consultant) in any working group. Gareth has worked on many large schemes using all versions of WCPG for public, private and charitable clients. Happy to share his details, if you need them".

NE noted in the chat "Likewise happy to go to the ICF membership if you need more folk".

AOB

JW thanked everyone for their engagement.

JW confirmed that we propose a face-to-face meeting on 1st September in Birmingham. While we are looking to see if we can make it blended, everyone is encouraged to travel if possible. The agenda will include WCPG and restocking, but please suggest any other agenda ideas.

ACTION: All to provide additional agenda suggestions, if you have any, for the face-to-face meeting in Birmingham.

The meeting closed at 16:30.

END