

Ref: AFG 05/22

AFG Minutes: 01/09/2022**Location:** Birmingham**Chair:** Joe Watts**Secretary:** Tamsin Quayle**Attendees****AFG Members:**

Neil Douglas (RSPB) **ND**
Graham Clark (CLA) **GC**
David Lewis (RICS) **DL**
Graham Garratt (ICF) **GG**
Poppy Sherborne (NFU) **PS**

Cheryl Lundberg (RFS) **CL**
Stan Abbott (WT) **SA**
Julian Ohlsen **JA**

FC/Defra:

Alec Rhodes (FC) **AR**
Joe Watts (FC) **JW**
Penny Oliver (FC) **PO**
Anna Brown (FC) **AB**
Mark Prior (FC) **MP**

Annie Weddle (FC) **AW**
Tamsin Quayle (FC) **TQ**
Ian Tubby (FC) **IT**
Chris Watson (FC) **CW**
Ewan Calcott (FC) **EC**

Apologies:

Steph Rhodes (FC)
Sam Neck (FC)
James Russell (Community Forests)
Neville Elstone (ICF)
Nick Phillips (WT)
Claire Douglas (RPA)
Mark Broadmeadow (FC)
Hannah Dawson (FC)
Adrian Jowitt (Natural England)

Brian Fraser (HTA) Jackie Dunne (Confor)
Paul Orsi (Sylva)
Ian Baker (Small Woods)
Melanie Edgar (FC)
Fjolla Morina (FC)
Andrew White (FC)
Brian Fraser (HTA)
Rory Lunny (DEFRA)
Hugh Loxton (DEFRA)

AFG Minutes

Welcome

JW led the welcome and invited everyone to do 'round the table' introductions.

Restocking

IT introduced and gave explanation of why restocking is included in agenda.
CW presented slides

During presentation (comments)

JO asked to clarify if it is a legal requirement to restock severe windblow in Scotland.

(Discussion point) Species Choice – What challenges are you facing?

GG asked to discuss the reasons why the FC will not pay for restocking rather than jumping straight to challenges of species choice. Commenting that FC have previously alluded to paying towards restocking(?) and suggested that there should be compensation or restocking should be paid for and feels that there is a loss of freedom.

JO suggested a baseline: if the request is to replace with what was there, no grant should be offered. If restocking with new species is there an option for grant? Also commented that he feels there is no freedom within restocking.

EC permanency of woodland means restocking is required. Options for additionality might be to increase canopy cover (more trees, more timber) and to consider alternatives to reinstate in-situ. Replace trees in different locations to felling site to make better use of overall available land management.

GG Commented that he often engages with people who manage woods at a loss and quite often have the view that they are not going to fell woods that require restocking because it is not financially viable: it costs more to restock than the timber financial return.

JO commented that it is a legal obligation within European law which is why state aid is not available.

GG questioned the validity of the law considering that UK is no longer in Europe.

JW responded that it is covered by the Treasury.

DC agreed with GG comments.

CW agreed that this is a fundamental issue and is an unintended consequence of not having restocking support.

IT – Resilience. Where government should / shouldn't intervene.

GC commented that the basis of restocking is a fundamental point. Trying to encourage more people to plant woodland where there is no funding for restocking is going to make people lose interest.

JO explained that resilience planning and restocking were challenges that he had faced. There is encouragement to enhance with improved stock and believes this may be more appealing if that was funded to encourage best practice. JO also explained that they are currently facing stock issues with the tree species listed and need support from the FC.

CL has noticed that people are choosing to thin rather than restock and are also choosing to put profit back into ground preparation. Believes there should be funding mechanisms to support good husbandry and maintenance to recognise what people are putting back into woodlands. Another challenge is maintaining woodland cover and woodland regeneration in Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

EC supported CL's point that it's not just about buying trees and putting in ground, there is a huge importance in ground preparation. There other ways to undertake silvicultural practice to mitigate felling and restock approach. The current felling licence regime encourages speculation about whether tree felling will happen, but long licence periods mean neither the FC or the Sector has intelligence on whether felling has, or will take place, or how much licensed timber remains available, and where.

CW raised the issue regarding capacity in nurseries, you can't encourage to plant species if they aren't available.

JO raised the issue of maintenance and quality of maintenance. There is more expectation to maintain species on restock sites and consideration needed regarding plastics on restocking sites.

CW raised the issue of additional costs that come with tree tubes and shelters, manual weeding although this is a future problem as herbicides can't be used with species.

CL discussed PAWS and restocking with Conifer components. Believes there is more flexibility needed on species, especially on PAWS. **CL** would like to see broader changes on Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) with more flexibility through a Woodland Management Plan (WMP).

GG removing conifer from PAWS and contribution to more diversity to woods. Would like to see more flexibility within felling license to WMP which **EC** confirmed that this would be covered by Reform agenda item.

CL raised that she had seen group planting being used on sites as an alternative for restocking.

CW – There is tension around being able to do what you want to do with species, felling and restocking? Benefits being given rather than being told what to do.

GG Requested FC's view on Scots pine in England

CW responded that there is no clear line of where Scots pine is native in England. Can this be clarified?

JO Raised the issue of squirrels and nurse species. There is a need to restock ash with conifers to act as another nurse to species. Conifer is nurse to everything else, in woodland management plan. **JO** referred to previous point regarding stock issues and raised the point that they are having to decide whether to leave site for another year due to no stock, or plant with different stock.

SA commented that there is no access to provenance and investment in seed sector needed.

IT planting conifer in 20/30-year-old woodland – FC thinking.

Demonstrate public benefit underplanting with different species. **IT** requested that if anyone has evidence of woodlands where ash planting has failed, and different species have been planted for public benefit that these are sent into FC.

PAWS restoration: what challenges are you facing?

CW asked the group if that have any other challenges that have not already been covered in previous chat.

GG raised the issue of ground preparation techniques and asked what issues are being faced on PAWS sites.

EC diversity of woodland structure and composition will help to contain sensitives e.g., EPS that land managers have to address in sustainable way which shouldn't be a problem at scale. The economic challenge comes from trying to work the small pockets of PAWS sites in isolation.

JO suggested complementary planting.

JO added that a challenge he has experienced is where they are guiding new owners into management and where PAWS is being managed under CS, he has concerns about being able to deliver under current timescales and RPA are not

interested in reasons why. This is leading to people being more hesitant about CS where they think it is a woodland quality improvement grant which it is not. JO mentioned that CS is less flexible and difficult to negotiate and do not have realistic targets for 5-year period.

PO 5+ year agreements will need to be made more flexible. FC are learning from how CS is run and will that feed that back into future grants.

DC believes that there are cases in which the landowner's endeavor to meet requirement in CS agreement, but go on to get penalised and this will get publicised through word of mouth and this will deter others from applying.

EC explained that there is a plan to improve felling license forms to have greater flexibility to enable the license to be amended once issued.

IT spoke about HT 5-year contracts and asked for feedback from AFG of where they think pests are accelerating due to climate change and more work is being put in to keep woodland in sensible condition.

CL requested flexibility on felling licenses and gave a scenario of where the intention is to thin but rate of degradation is too fast, can the license be updated from thinning to felling?

Restocking in LISS: what challenges are you facing?

JO explained that this silviculture system can be very expensive and gave the example of Tavistock. The current system does not pay and there is a lack of skill set. The biggest expense is management costs, and it comes back to cost and definitive result of felling and restocking. If you are restocking on a bigger scale the costs are manageable however on a small scale the costs rocket.

GG gave an example of an ancient woods he is managing with coup felling where there are no plastics or herbicides used, so management costs are higher. There is no timber on site so sustaining woods on landscape at lower cost. The species that are coming through are taking 10+ years to show and is concerned on a fell and restock scenario that these wouldn't be picked up on inspection due to 10-year regeneration period and that the timescales are an issue.

IT requested that AFG shares ball-park figures of operational costs as FC has a weak point on economic evidence. **GG** raised that this may be difficult as sites don't stop/start so can't report on calendar year. **IT** agreed that he is aware its long term but would be useful to have real life examples.

EC asked a question to sector regarding timber sales vs price of timber going up/down. Is there a role for FC to 'do more' to bring the 50% of forest not in management into a managed state (i.e., paying for activities?); more work = more demand on nurseries

CL mentioned that Woodland Trust has package to stimulate interest to go to consultant to source ancient PAWS sites and help people understand what they have and how to manage. Suggested agent package to encourage management of woodlands. **JO** raised a point regarding capital costs previously being 100% and now that it is 60% people are less inclined to manage woodlands especially on sites where people don't have woods for profit. **PO** offered to produce figures on infrastructure grant numbers.

GG raised a point regarding principles of private states and how farming enterprise is bigger than forest enterprise. He has experienced there being less interest in Forestry and more about the estate and only maintain the level of Forestry that they do.

SA commented about the regulatory environment that is more about a few bad occasions and the sector would relish more flexibility. To which JW confirmed that regulatory is for the 'bad guys' and the rules can be abused if not right. There was a suggestion for a practitioner to provide evidence to support reason and to be able to demonstrate why it makes sense and what is accepted by WO's and FC.

GG asked the question on what can FC do to increase level of activity and raised that one issue is contractors not being overly recognized as a career option which leads to a lack of capacity within contractors. Can FC help to promote as career option and provide capital investments?

Existing financial support: What works and what could be improved?

JO raised the tree health pilot scheme and gave an example of the IPS site in SE where the speed of response was critical, but the FC grant support doesn't work in the same way. Also raised that it is difficult to quote 80% of grant and can this be renegotiated. Overall agrees with the grant and is happy to work with it.

AB responded that the tree health is a pilot so is open to change. Suggested 2 different grants; 1. Outbreak response grant 2. Protecting the resource grant (proactive) which the FC are currently looking into.

Referencing **JO** previous point regarding the working being difficult to quote due to receiving 80% of the grant, **EC** suggested a bridging grant based on a sensible estimate or initial offer with a subsequent final offer.

IT asked for views from the ground on the tree health grant, does it work and if not, where can it be improved? **CL** believes that the grant is simple compared to other grants. **JO** raised a concern that it relies on standard costs that are well out of date and asked how often standard costs would be reviewed to which **JW** confirmed that there is no direct commitment to say whether there would be an annual update but confirmed that they are being updated. FC are aware of this concern and Defra are looking into it.

GC raised an issue regarding the tree health funding and mentioned that when customers look at costs, they raise the issue about actual costs not being covered.

JO suggested that management plans should be received on an annual basis rather than 5 years and support should be provided for updating plans. To which **CG** said he would prefer more flexibility on management plans.

EC highlighted that the Felling License Online system is being looked at and improved. Currently, felling and restock proposals forming part of the plan of operations last for 10 years, but there is no intelligence on what happens and when, so FC must wait until post expiry of the Licence, and an inspection is completed, to find out.

PO raised that current plans are supporting future schemes and WO have more flexibility to approve more plans.

JO asked if the map and annex in the plan is a new requirement, and has it changed this year? **PO** said she would look into the process as doesn't believe it should have changed.

Break for lunch

Regulation Reform Prioritisation

EC presented slides.

Comments during slides:

GG commented that drought and flood are not site specific and raised the question if there is an action to suspend all Felling Licensing regionally. **EC** confirmed it would be done on a case-by-case basis.

EC Research being conducted by Defra on 'permanency'. Currently, temporary trees or woodland are not eligible for Woodland Carbon Code

JW said any 'temporary' woodlands would be subset of new woodlands rather than blanket designation.

EC FC-Defra are still working out what kind of Registration process to elect woodland to be non-permanent

JO raised a question regarding Paulownia schemes, and is there a plan to take people to court if planted elsewhere?

PS raised concern with members of public and permanency of forests.

EC commented that they need to establish what sites can be prioritised.

GG would not it be better to have 25% - 30% of permanent woodland alongside core areas of species for temporary SRF/SRC

JW there a concern FC are going to be accused of greenwashing? Temporary woodland vs permanent woodland have a different value to society, so what FC are willing to offer in terms of grant may differ.

Felling license taskforce

JO mentioned that he is finding felling license online is working better than the previous paper applications and asked if FC also have a positive point of view, to which **EC** responded that the internal FC work is not all system based as some elements are desk based - so the FC doesn't have the same experience as the customer. New IT systems are being looked out and the FC would be interested in continued feedback from the sector.

UKFS Management Operations Compliance review

MP presented slides.

Comments during slides

IT FC needs to do a better job of communicating what UKFS looks like.

MP asked the group 'Is there a problem with non UKFS compliance? Key areas of risk which should be focused on? How should we choose a worthwhile sample of sites to visit? Should we encourage and make use of self-reporting?'

JO mentioned that early recognition is where feedback comes from, and trust needs to be invested into woodland managers who need to report back the positives and negatives. He also agreed to allowing FC to look at local operation site.

JW asked for anonymous feedback

GG asked if the data that is collected on licenses and compliance checks is self-reporting and has been reported from woodland managers.

EC confirmed new ways of checking felling and restocking compliance are being developed through satellite observation and cross referencing with Licence data on the online system when thinning/felling has been complete. Further development could see cases where people log details of their felling and or restocking online and are then potentially a lower risk for non-compliance, allowing more of a focus on where change occurs without a Licence has been picked up on satellite images.

ND mentioned from a RSPB perspective that their priority is getting more woodland into UKFS and incorporate an auditing approach. They recognize that there is an affordability challenge, however.

DL would like to see greater involvement of WO's coming to site. The CS officers don't appear to have the same amount of knowledge and a significant amount is lost by just relying on binary assessment. **EC** confirmed that Defra are working across ALBs (arms length bodies) with a shared knowledge approach of greater learning and greater understanding.

JO would like to see full disclosure, what are the risks? Raised a point regarding illegal felling that isn't intended where they manage coups with harvesting machines and although it is reported correctly it is not intentional.

GG commented that he would like to see inspections completed by someone who competently understands what is going on, and not by someone who deems non-compliance via a paper assessment.

MP finalized the session by saying that he would be in touch directly to discuss arranging 121's

England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO) Update and Woodland Creation Planning Grant (WCPG) Changes

AR presented slides and asked for volunteers to review EWCO application forms - **SA** and **CL** volunteered.

SA raised that he recently experienced an application which was returned due to not submitting the most recent application form but that the form was almost the same as the one they submitted other than two points which was frustrating and time consuming. **AR** recognized this but replied that FC had tried to be flexible on version numbers up to this point but needed to standardize the form to help processing.

DL raised the issue of duplicated stakeholder engagement across WCPG, EWCO/EIA etc. which is time consuming and not necessary.

JO raised an issue of where they submitted an application which had a number of supporting documents the email was not received by the FC but this was not apparent until he contacted FC to follow-up and was informed that it hadn't been received. **JO** asked whether there is there a server in which documents can be uploaded onto. **AW** took an action to look into this.

ND asked when the updated riparian buffer layer will be uploaded onto LIS to which **AR** suggested October with a plan to archive the previous version so it was available for alongside the updated layer.

Woodland Creation Planning Grant (WCPG)

JO asked if WCPG could have a format similar to the current felling license online initially as Expression of Interest (EoI) to determine whether something is low, medium or high risk as there are currently a lot of checks to complete through the processing for schemes that may not actually continue. He also asked if it is possible to have an online system where all documents and information can be held which can then transfer seamless through to EWCO. He raised a point of frustration of where a Woodland Creation Design Plan (WCDP) completed WCPG stage and then when it moves to EWCO a different Woodland Officer deals with the case and this is where requests for documents is duplicated.

GG asked if the 14,500 hectares pipeline is so large it will hit budget restrictions **JW** confirmed that as this is in the pipeline and did not anticipate a problem because it would not all come forward at once.

GC raised a concern regarding processing times for EWCO and asked if this is down to training issues with new staff or a processing issue. He also asked if the FC feel they have enough people in the Woodland Officer (WO) role or is it a case

of bringing everyone up to speed with training. **JW** confirmed WO capacity is the current limiting factor due to training and the ongoing recruitment but the FC are still recruiting. FC is aware of the issue and looking into various solutions including streamlining the WO process, the admin team and digitising processes. In addition, the new WO Development Programme has launched which will slowly increase capacity.

MP supported this with an example: that the FC are also focusing on prioritizing tasks and at the right time – for example prioritising EWCO in the summer and then moving onto Higher Tier.

PS asked where capacity is affected, what is being done to manage expectations on planting years? She also explained that the newsletter which was sent prompted more questions than answers and would request more specific timescales if possible? **AR** advised that every case is different, and it would be best to speak with WO/Area teams for more specific answer on processing times for individual applications.

JO suggested that WOs are empowered further and to also introduce EOI board to process and refuse applications quicker. **AR** confirmed that they are trying to take a harder line on when applications are rejected straight away, however Area teams have resisted this feeling they may have the local contacts to get the information quickly and move the application forwards. AR also set out his hope that the forthcoming Grant Management System and its online portal and should increase the submission of complete applications and provide applications with better information to track applications.

EC – noted the work the FC had done on prioritising and sequencing work types and the work on regulation cases that are in progress, and also drew attention to the impact of the significant policy changes in last few months, (wading birds, peat) on processing.

ND asked how many hectares of natural colonisation are currently proposed in EWCO applications and **AR** confirmed 50 hectares currently in EWCO pipeline and agreements

AR invited the Group to bring forward any discussion topics or request requests for date on EWCO and WCPG for future meetings.

AOB

The topic of drought which was covered in the E alert on 18th August was raised. **JW** confirmed that the FC are looking into what can be done so will update in due

course. **JO** asked if restocking will be included to which **JW** referenced 2018 and how the plan is heavily based on what was offered then but cannot confirm yet. **JW** also requested feedback from 'on the ground' experience of how plants have been affected.

GG asked if the FC were only looking into one planting season? To which **JW** confirmed they are focusing on the most vulnerable plants.

JO suggested that data should be available by the end of September but trees that had shelters have suffered less than the trees which were unguarded.

GG said that they plan to beat up in the next couple of weeks but certain how clear it will be to see how many losses and may have to wait until January. **JW** suggested completing a beat-up session now to assess trees that appear to be dead and re do in Spring in case of any that has rejuvenated and then report back.

JW requested that beat up feedback is reported back to FC.

EWCO to ELM

The question was asked 'How has it landed in sector?'

JO commented that he is unsure as there has not been a notice, but it has been hinted previously to clients.

GG explained that it is the wrong time of year, and he foresees that they won't know until new applications have been received after the planting season.

JW encouraged that if clients raise queries or concerns regarding the process then re-enforce them to not wait.

PS confirmed that NFU have mentioned this in their newsletter so will feedback any comments.

JO provided feedback from within Tilhill where they are completing a WCPG on an AONB and the woodland officer is insisting that the archaeological landscape institute practitioner complete the landscape assessment rather than the agent.

GG praised that the FC explored the restocking discussion matter in depth

JW asked for feedback on the set up of the face-to-face meeting and suggested that the next one is held virtually.

JW wrapped up meeting

End