

Ref: AFG 08/2022

AFG Minutes: 30/11/2022**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**Cameron Hughes (CLA) **CH**David Lewis (RICS) **DL**Graham Garratt (ICF) **GG**Adrian Jowitt (Natural England) **AJ**Simon James (Small Woods) **SJ**Caroline Ayre (Confor) **CA**Julian Ohlsen (SW AFG) **JO**Claire Douglas (RPA) **CD**Poppy Sherborne (NFU) **PS**Jackie Dunne (Confor) **JD**James Russell (Community Forests) **JR**Brian Fraser (HTA) **BF**Clive Thomas (Soil Association) **CT****FC/Defra:**Joe Watts (FC) **JW**Andrew White (FC) **AW**Evie Budrike (FC) **EB**Melanie Edgar (Defra) **ME**Rory Lunny (Defra) **RL**Katie Booth (FC) **KB**Penny Oliver (FC) **POI**Alex Holsgrove (FC) **AH**David Robertson (FC) **DR**

Richard Hofman (FC)

Miriam Goodridge (FC) observing

Ewan Wallace (FC) observing

Sarah Lawson (FC) observing

Emma Dunphy (FC) observing

Apologies:

Steph Rhodes (FC)

John Blessington (Local Government)

Paul Orsi (Sylva)

Cheryl Lundberg (RFS)

AFG Minutes

Welcome

JW opened the session and welcomed all, introducing those new to the group.

Woodland Management Plans (WMPs)

AW presented the slides.

GG noted the need to consider what the minimum is required to make a WMP fit for purpose, as Forestry Commission (FC) Woodland Officers (WOs) ask for more. It should be a working tool and not an academic exercise. **GG** likes the ten-year felling licence as there are other licence and grant applications in a constant loop, so a ten-year period for that is a relief. Any requirement for flexibility should be managed within the existing ten-year period, perhaps with a mechanism put in place so you can amend in the second five years to fine tune it as circumstances change.

AW acknowledged that WOs striving for perfection is a theme and we are aware of the need to avoid 'perfection being the enemy of the good'. We just need to hit the UKFS standard, and this requires training to make sure all are aware this is the process.

JD raised the need to consider if every single wood on a land holding should be within the WMP, as it takes time and effort to go around every small shelter belt and is not of massive benefit. **JD** also suggested the need to look at items such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) across the whole holding and not just woodland. With reference to the template, this has moved away from anything useful for clients to access and could hinder work taking place. The layout is wrong and should be in line with what is trying to be achieved. The time taken to create the WMPs is not covered by the grants available. **JD** agrees that a ten-year felling licence is vital, and the FC needs to become better at being flexible with them, as was seen following the storms this year.

AW acknowledged that we need to make sure the information collected is important for us to have and can be assessed in the field, so this will be looked at to make sure it aligns. **AW** also agreed that better identification of ancient monuments on the ground has come through strongly from historic environment colleagues.

JO supports the comments already made about the ten-year felling licence, noting that the effort involved in this needs to create some benefits. Flexibility is needed and this is a felling licence, not a WMP issue. WMPs are already simplistic and must be added to so there is anything worthwhile putting to a client. One size does not fit all. To fit small woodland on farms with ELM you need a different plan from a WMP. **JO** thought this

would just be a separate risk assessment for small woods. The biggest issue is applying for grants in the first place, as there is difficulty getting applications acknowledged and a need to avoid asking for more information than might be needed for operational planning.

JD noted support for **JO's** comments in the chat, confirming that "for all my clients I produce a separate spreadsheet with compartment descriptions, long term aim and what we might achieve in this 10-year period. This is what the client and I use not the FC templates. I used to do this in the FC spreadsheet until it changed 4-5 years ago. ".

SJ has been involved in some WMP conversations and believe the application process needs to be more transparent, perhaps with a portal where you can check on progress. The current outcome for WMPs is to feed into an area figure for how much woodland is in management (as it has a management plan) but although adding a step, feedback from practitioners confirming that areas have been worked as per the plan, would serve us better for this type of figure. The WMP needs to be innovative and dynamic moving forward. **SJ** envisages the ability to be more modular with it, pulling components from the UKFS, walking the site, and using your expertise, writing a prescription against the standard UKFS text that adds value. **SJ** agrees that ten years is right for the felling licence where there is a WMP and suggested the need to have the freedom to change could be handled by being able to switch off the existing licence (if no longer appropriate to plant health or activities) and apply for another. The only issue then would be the possibility of the licence length being out of sync with the WMP.

Conversation in the chat noted concerns from **GG** and **JD** about switching off a felling licence completely and further suggestions from **SJ** on possibly timing of any switch off to coincide with a new licence being issued avoid the concerns raised.

AW noted that complexity in the status of WMPs is a good point and needs to be looked at and acknowledged the online portal request, and the need to look at how we can best give applicants a good understanding of where their application is at. The suggested modular approach is an interesting idea and **AW** would like to pick up on this outside of the meeting as it has not been raised before.

ACTION: AW to contact **SJ** to discuss further the idea of a modular approach to WMPs.

NE queried whether WMP will be mandatory for Landscape Recovery in ELM and suggested a need to re-engage on the topics of earned recognition, as the Institute of Chartered Foresters have done a lot of work on this, and on the work funded by Woodlands into Management grants now being done by Sylva and Cumbria Woodland.

ME responded to **NE's** Landscape Recovery query in the chat, confirming that "Landscape Recovery projects are being funded to produce a land management plan as part of their project development phase, which will include woodland management plans within it. They are being funded to do this through their project development funding so would not need to apply for woodland management planning grant. Forestry Commission will work with NE and EA to approve project plans before they move to implementation".

ND queried if the woodland wildlife toolkit could be looked at and if there are any initiatives underway looking at EWCO uptake.

POI confirmed that the condition assessment in the SFI pilot is the woodland wildlife condition assessment.

AW responded to acknowledge all comments around the length of the felling licence, the consensus that it should remain at ten years, and that greater flexibility appears to be the solution to maintain a balance.

JW also confirmed that the group's desire to maintain a ten-year felling licence has been clearly heard but noted that to obtain the flexibility being requested requires some legislative change. **JW** also acknowledged the need for the FC to work to a 'good enough' approach, it is part of our training, and we need to get this right.

ELM Update

POI introduced the section and **AH** and **ME** presented the slides.

JO raised that this could be a good opportunity to put resilience restocking or improved restocking as a supplement to encourage people into the scheme. **JO** also noted with regards to the Tree Health Pilot that landowners in southeast England feel it is disproportionate, as acting quickly on IPS to protect conifer resources in the rest of the UK has a big cost implication. A suggestion would be to look at identifying approximate costs initially, work quickly to remove the threat and then review the actual costs.

JW confirmed that we are working on this.

POI noted in the chat that, "Thinking about putting restocking into resilience supplement and ancient woodland restoration".

ME noted that restocking has already been raised by FC colleagues working on tree health and the team are looking at where it best sits within the supplements. **ME** will

table the idea of putting it in as a separate supplement. **ME** also noted an awareness of the need to learn more from the Tree Health Pilot.

NE mentioned income foregone and paying for eco system services and that this has started through EWCO, so it would be great to mirror that around woodland management.

ME acknowledged that the payment mechanism question is justified. Income foregone plus costs has been used for a while and has not been particularly good in the creation space. Alternative options are being discussed and Defra colleagues are open to these. Woodlands are the ideal space to look at this and **ME** is optimistic that an alternative system for woodland can be found.

CT queried what sort of interface or integration there would be with wider tree-related planting at a farm or estate level. While agro-forestry and wider landscape schemes should not be designated as forestry there are some opportunities for integration.

ME noted that the group has previously heard from a colleague, Richard Beddard, who leads on agro-forestry and wood pasture. The team has sat down with him to look at how much planning work can be brought together with recognition that activities are likely to overlap quite a bit.

ACTION: ME and **AW** will take feedback back to Richard Beddard and will come back to the group in future with a proposal for an approach on integrating agro-forestry work with the woodland planning work.

DL reiterated support for funding for improved restocking and queried if the annual management grant for certain woodland will still be available as well as the capital grants. **DL** feels adding supplements is a great idea and hopes it will be simple to apply for and that it will not all need to be applied for in one go, as flexibility is needed given things change over five or ten years.

JW confirmed that the blue items shown on the slide had previously been capital items and the proposal is these are moved to annual payments.

ME added that for those items listed in the slide it will be revenue plus capital and all will be annual payments, but that capital may be available in addition to support activity where needed. There is work looking at EWCO and CS but also anything additional needed to support activity, and **ME** will come back to the group at the start of next year to look at new items in capital space.

JD queried in the chat whether capital could be over five years instead of two, and **ME** responded to confirm “We are exploring an extension of the timing for capital as we recognise that the current timelines don’t work for many”.

ACTION: KB to add a further ELM Update to the forward look for January’s meeting.

GG noted that he likes the approach and that it reflects the structure of the woodland creation offer. By delivering a range of things under a single payment, WD2 lacks clarity relating to non-compliance. Having a supplementary approach will make it easier to target any consequences. **GG** also queried where veteran tree management fits.

ME confirmed that veteran trees are included under the two supplements top left of the slide (priority and ancient woodland), but the team will also look at it as a separate option (for veteran trees outside of woodland). **AH** confirmed in the chat that the feedback on veteran trees will be passed back to Neil Riddle as they are working with him on improving support for ancient and veteran trees.

JR supports **NE** and **GG**, acknowledging this is a half-step towards mirroring some EWCO design on rewarding provision of public goods. **JR** would encourage a bigger step in that direction to be taken, given the amount of data modelling and proven evaluation techniques that have been available for a decade now.

NP echoed **JR’s** position and supports use of public money for public goods. There is an advantage to it looking like the woodland creation approach as for it to differ would look strange. It would be good to see how this links with trees outside woodland such as wood pasture and grazing and would be positive to integrate them.

PS queried how the approach will work with stacking other sources of funding, is it possible to combine supplements and private finance?

ME responded that that opportunity for stacking and encouraging use of private finance is one of the reasons the supplement approach is felt to be positive. If you can get finance from another source for something then you do not need to go for the supplement, so this approach should allow more flexibility in where you get your funding from.

ND noted that in the past there was a request to move away from area-based payment, so this appears positive. It is difficult to judge how it might work at an individual site level, but **ND** is happy to pass the proposal on and gather feedback.

JD feels this is already done on WD2 as the scoring covers key areas. While it will be great to see supplements, it does add complexity and **JD** would like to understand how it

will be monitored and reviewed, and what the implications may be if something is not as FC expect, given site visits no longer happen. This is important given the amount of money behind some schemes.

JR wished to underline the importance of getting support right for woodland management, given the government's ambitious targets for woodland creation. If signals are not sent that society values existing woodland for the benefits it brings (and not just financial gain) then there will be a question mark over why new woodland should be created. This has been a weak spot.

ME confirmed that they are working closely with the scheme design team to make sure there is flexibility, and that they are hoping to have a fast-moving amendment process and a simpler way of doing this in future. It is hoped the supplements model supports this. It should offer the ability to add a supplement that has become relevant, rather than needing to amend WD2. ME invited any further comments in the chat or by email (melanie.edgar@defra.gov.uk).

An overview of changes to Countryside Stewardship (CS) for 2023

EB presented the slides.

DL queried how the AC1 Access Capital Items grant differs from the infrastructure grant, as there could be cross over, and AC1 has a higher funding rate than infrastructure.

EB confirmed that infrastructure is viewed as such as roads to access timber and the access item is when providing public access and there is a need to improve that access (for example with benches) and is aimed at those of foot and not vehicles.

DL noted that tracks used by vehicles are often also used by the public and may need improvement, hence the cross over.

EB acknowledges that the access capital item is for people rather than goods but given the existing guidance is vague there is some scope for creativity regarding proposals that may go through. The team will review what has been done to date and summarise some examples to feed back to the group.

JD noted this work is very welcome and the changes are exciting. **JD** raised issues regarding the level of work required given the amount asked at application stage when you do not even know if you will be accepted (not all clients may be prepared to invest so heavily ahead of acceptance). It may not be possible to resolve but **JD** wished to flag.

GG queried where it is anticipated three quotes will come from for labour under FY3 (to incentivise squirrel traps and maintenance), as the most likely scenario is that estate and groundskeeping staff would do that work.

EB confirmed the cost of the traps themselves is the variable and it is understood that the labour cost will likely be consistent and this needs to be made clearer.

GG flagged that where there are no staff to complete this work then use of outside contractors would involve another magnitude of cost. **GG** also noted that if applying for a three-year programme of standard capital works, they would like the capital to be available through the WD2 agreement but queried if it would be possible to split the works and apply for another sequential agreement. This could make certain proposals more feasible

EB noted that in theory this could work but is not confident whether the system will allow it.

ACTION: EB and **GG** to discuss offline the topic of whether splitting capital works and applying for two sequential agreements and test the system to see if it can be made to work.

JW noted that we have had CS for more than seven years and are still refining and improving it.

CS HEFERs - Historic England advice using the 'Essential' tick box

DR introduced himself and presented the slides.

JD raised that the point at which a HEFER is received is too late for woodland management and it would be preferable to have it with the WMP.

DR agreed that having the advice as early as possible is very important. However, the Selected Heritage Inventory for Natural England (SHINE) dataset used for a HEFER is owned by a group of around 80 Local Authorities (LAs) who do not currently support its use for WMPs (or in woodland creation). FC are working on this and are in conversation with The Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers (ALGAO). **DR** referenced back to **AW's** presentation and noted we are trying to get to a stage where historic environment information and advice comes during the WMP.

JD noted that a lot of consultation happens at the WMP stage already and involves WOs going into Council offices to look at paper-based data, so the hope would be that Historic England (HE) might advise their intention to tick the essential box at that stage.

SJ also noted in the chat that applicants should be able to easily anticipate that the essential box will be ticked.

JD requested a HEFER when applying for WCPG and EWCO.

JW responded to confirm the situation for this is the same as for having them at WMP stage as the LAs will not allow use of the SHINE dataset in woodland creation proposals.

DR confirmed as mentioned before these are live issues being worked on and would like to come to a future AFG and talk about the national woodland creation historic environment datasets project. The datasets project has funding to deliver this over the next two years.

GG queried in the chat "Does an action have to be Essential to be eligible for heritage funding, or could it be non-Essential but desirable?" and "What data is there for how many Essential SMs in woods and implications for reducing WD2 applications?".

DR confirmed that an action does not have to be essential to be eligible, if the box is ticked in future that will make it a requirement but that does not mean that if you have a Scheduled Monument (SM) and the box it's not ticked or another SHINE feature that you cannot apply options to manage them, you can.

DR also confirmed the criteria for the essential box to be ticked in the chat, as follows:

From the current version of the HEFER service standard:

The 'essential' box should only be 'checked' if:

1. The principal vulnerability can be addressed via agri-environment; this does not include coastal erosion, permitted development, or vandalism.
2. The current land use can be identified with confidence, and advice does not include the 4 woodland management advice codes. As some of these new forestry management recommendation codes do not have an associated paid option, these should not be marked 'essential' (this will be reviewed after live testing).
3. The monument is at medium or high risk.
4. The intended outcome & the Management Recommendation can be closely defined, and can be immediately delivered with the options and capital items (i.e. without the need for a feasibility study or management plan to identify suitable management first). Some

associated capital items listed in the HEFER, for example fencing, may be precluded if a HMAA fills the entire parcel. SMC will not override the eligibility checks for these items.

5. The intended outcome can be delivered by the Tier covered by the HEFER Request (i.e. some options are not available in Mid-Tier). Note that some options are new to MT (2018 onwards) and require Natural England endorsement (flagged in the notes).
6. The HMAA can be drawn exactly where that action needs to happen and any irrelevant areas have been removed.
7. Historic England will support RPA in upholding the advice if the applicant should appeal against a rejection.

CA raised that there is an advisory group for this, and **CA** has been sitting on it but has struggled to make the meetings. If anyone else on the AFG is more experienced as an applicant dealing with these issues, then they are encouraged to volunteer to take **CA's** place.

JW asked for volunteers to put their name in the chat or contact **DR** (david.robertson@forestrycommission.gov.uk).

GG commented that the answers seem inadequate (not **DB's** fault). Either heritage should be included or not, but it should not be made difficult.

DR acknowledged and noted that FC are working hard to make it more straightforward through the datasets project and a historic environment technical guidance project and there will be a lot to talk about on both in the future so the group will have more information.

ACTION: KB to add an update on the historic environment datasets work to the forward look for a future AFG.

AOB

JW invited AOB. None was raised by the group.

JW confirmed that the next meeting is already in diaries for 26th January 2023. This will include a review of WCPG and thoughts on EWCO, and probably another ELM Update.

JW advised there will be a new secretariat taking over from **KB**, Sarah Lawson, and a recurring invite will be sent out for the remainder of 2023 (with April 27th and October 12th likely to be the face to face, probably in Birmingham).

JW invited any thoughts on the meetings' organisation to be set to himself and Sarah (joe.watts@forestrycommission.gov.uk and sarah.lawson@forestrycommission.gov.uk).

JW wished everyone a happy Christmas and thanked all for their participation.

The meeting closed at 12:23.

END