

Ref: AFG 03/2023

AFG Minutes: 16/03/2023

Location: Webinar/teleconference

Chair: Joe Watts

Secretary: Sarah Lawson

Attendees

AFG Members:

Neil Douglas (RSPB) **ND**

Neville Elstone (Cumbria Woodlands) **NE**

David Lewis (RICS) **DL**

Graham Garratt (ICF) **GG**

Claire Douglas (RPA) **CD**

Poppy Sherborne (NFU) **PS**

Jackie Dunne (Confor) **JD**

Graham Clark (CLA) **GC**

Nick Phillips (Woodland Trust) **NP**

Simon James (Small Woods) **SJ**

Paul Orsi (Sylva) **POr**

Cheryl Lundberg (RFS) **CL**

Adrian Jowitt (Natural England) **AJ**

Clive Thomas (Soil Association) **CT**

FC/Defra:

Joe Watts (FC) **JW**

Penny Oliver (FC) **PO**

Ewan Calcott (FC) **EC**

Annie Gordon (FC) **AG**

John Powell (FC) **JP**

Katy Moseley (FC) **KM**

Sarah Robinson (FC) **SR**

Anna Brown (FC) **AB**

Sarah Lawson (FC) **SL**

Stephanie Rhodes (FC) **SRh**

Fjolla Morina (FC) **FM**

Chris Waterfield (FC) **CW**

Andrew Canning-Trigg (FC) **ACT**

Chris Tomlin (FC) **CT**

Rory Lunny (Defra) **RL**

Rebecca Waite (Defra) **RW**

Sarah Willmott (FC) observing

Apologies:

Alec Rhodes (FC)

Keith Jones (FC)

Julian Ohlsen (SW AFG)

Hugh Loxton (Defra)

James Russell (Community Forests)

Daisy Ellis (Defra)

Steve Scott (FC)

Stan Abbott (Woodland Trust)

AFG Minutes

Welcome

JW opened the session and welcomed all.

Regulations Reform Update

EC presented the slides.

NE asked about the local authority / EA stuff on water: is that around quality and quantity and has that always engaged the lead local flood authority.

EC currently being worked through and how we're going to do that but water quality flood risk and engagement with management zones and flood defenses are protected through the Water Framework Directive. Also have issue of acid vulnerable catchments and these are the types of things we are discussing with EA, and how large a project needs to be before consulting with them. It's all going to form part of MOU.

ND asked about presumption in favour of afforestation – talked about low risk maps – what's that going to look like? What's the change? Is it the existing low risk maps or a new set of maps?

EC the existing EIA low risk map is locked in legislation so can't change it until we get the Levelling Up Regeneration Bill through, which is a couple of years away. So, we have essentially replaced that with low, medium and high sensitivity (note - not risk) mapping which is more of a live environment and can be updated as new data is made available. This allows all of us to make informed decisions about proposals. In terms of presumption in favour of afforestation, regarding low sensitivity mapping, we simply want to make clear to people looking to invest in tree planting those areas are the preferred and easiest places to get agreement to plant. Doesn't preclude them from proposing planting trees elsewhere in medium/high sensitivity areas, but there will be more scrutiny and more stakeholders involved in those medium/high sensitivity areas, and FC will sometimes say 'No'.

ND also asked about bird surveys regarding front loading that consultation – some of information isn't available at outset. Will there be an expectation of consultation before evidence is available or will consultation process start at point you've got that evidence.

EC advised that the desire is that surveying is undertaken at the planning stage by someone who is going through planning grant route. An agreed process is in place with NE that they can pre-vet planning grant applications (at Stage 1) to help inform if

surveys are required prior to progressing to Stage 2 planning – so failing to survey is de-risked as an issue. Risk arises when proposals only come through EWCO, and by relying on partners to flag up needs for potential surveys, which will be unfunded.

ND also queried regarding reducing the register time period from 28 to 21 days whether that was for all projects.

EC confirmed “yes” for all projects. We will also look to simplify a duplication that exists following the 2017 EIA Forestry Regs amendments, where almost all proposals afforestation go on register because they are a grant scheme but also have to go on register because they’re a specific component (Full Notification) of EIA decision making process. We have a small number of afforestation proposals that if they meet EIA requirements and if they come in as standalone EIA proposal because they’re in a low sensitivity area, the presumption in favour means we’re unlikely to get anything new as part of stakeholder engagement, so move ahead and make the regulatory decision supporting the presumption in favour of afforestation.

JD wanted to welcome what has been achieved. Aware that clients change their minds so have to be mindful and may have to recheck the risks. Only other thing that would love to see is priority habitat mapping which becomes more real the more information we can feed into it and then the more we can do with it.

EC agreed, and sensitivity mapping is only as good as the data we put into it so requires everyone to pull in same direction to improve that data wherever possible.

NE asked regarding the number of times and scope for practitioners to look at this and road test things and are there any areas where there is a need for challenge/change?

EC advised that they have been gathering evidence from scheme users over the last few months as well as re-establishing the communication that needs to occur between FC and other public bodies. The measures being brought in are a balance of those views; we would have liked to address LAs more but with other public bodies we are broadly on the same page. This is positive and provides clarity and simplification. There is probably still some issues e.g. water environment that will need to be adapted and adjusted. We’ve tried to make the consultation process and the mapping of how the forestry sector might start to work with environmental sensitivities a bit more robust and sustainable.

NE appreciate this but unsure whether there has been enough in terms of challenge from the people that actually drive this and fill in the forms.

EC happy to pick up regarding what else may be needed to ensure we’ve got any concerns properly covered.

[Subsequently: Following a further conversation with **NE**, EC agreed to provide a 'long list' of the Consultation duties on the Forestry Commission to some AFG members with a delivery component to their work, for the AFG to help advise FC on how best to land these reforms with the sector, in advance of rollout in late spring.]

GG (comment from chat): important to keep the administrative machinery up to date and well maintained for smoother running.

EC regarding the roll out we will continue to work on the MOU with the relevant authorities and the desire is to have the new arrangements in place by the time applications are being received for planting next winter.

JW we need AFG support in rolling out these new processes.

Forestry Training Fund

SR presented slides.

GG asked whether this is simple to apply for and how it works in terms of getting on the training.

SR confirmed that they have made it as simple as possible. There is a list of training providers but the list is currently being revised. As applications come in we're looking at the eligibility of the courses. The course list is being added to as we go.

SJ advised would be good to understand more about eligibility of applicants. It would be good if some of funding could be ringfenced to target workers that need upskilling rather than places being taken by hobbyists.

NE commented that would welcome feedback on applications received so far regarding the type of applicant and what interventions they've asked for; percentage of existing students on existing courses. It is a small percentage of the trees for climate budget that is being spent on skills. Would welcome feedback at a future date.

PS advised that she is currently cautious of promoting because unclear of criteria and due to time constraints it would be useful to know what information needs to go into an application to make it successful.

CL observation that with this and the apprenticeship scheme starting to cover all bases. The list of training providers is really useful and just wondered if there are existing links or potential for links with apprenticeship scheme.

JD commented that it would be useful to have the list so it was clear what area they were promoting the training in. Also think there is a massive gap is for planting teams and this could do with being addressed.

SR commented that it was useful feedback and they need to interrogate the data of who is accessing it where and when.

WCPG Survey Costs

JP presented slides.

NP advised that it sounds really positive and have spoken to some of teams who have used the scheme and one of big challenges is with getting larger scale schemes coming forward, as the larger scale surveys and sites have found this barely covers the costs. Would be good to chat more about standard costs and in relation to the real costs and the complexities.

JP confirmed they have a database of costs of previous surveys and this is something that they will be drawing upon but happy to pick up with those interested offline.

Design Changes for the Woodland Carbon Guarantee

AG presented slides.

CL commented that thoughts are that people are expecting to see prices in excess of £50 a ton so don't know if this can be committed to under this scheme. Also haven't come across a scheme proposal where people don't want to access the grants so unsure of viability.

NP commented that he is unsure why an applicant would necessarily go down this route. There seems to be a lot of people who don't know this exists unless they go through the grant scheme, but possibly the avoidance of going through the process without going through grant scheme may be a benefit. But an issue may be the awareness is quite low outside those who already are in the grant scheme.

JD advised that as a personal response she finds the timeline of the woodland carbon guarantee difficult and works with project developers because can hit the deadlines

better. The other issue is that with each auction there are changes and don't know what these are ahead which makes planning stage difficult.

GC commented that one of the issues is the sheer complexity of the woodland carbon code which can be off putting. Would be useful to see what hectareage those projects are that are coming through.

Link has been sent: <https://www.woodlandcarboncode.org.uk/woodland-carbon-guarantee>

ND asked regarding the intention that this would take over from an element of grant funding. Just wondering how much that is expected to happen and other question is about the eligibility of the woodland carbon guarantee to biofuel forestry.

CW advised regarding the biomass if you take a rotational felling woodland and timber is going into a biofuel plant, it's a rotational felling system which is allowed within the Woodland Carbon Code and it therefore depends on how short the rotation is and how much carbon there is on average across a period of time of the carbon project.

With regard to taking over from the grant funding this is only being discussed around the project group and we want to see what the feedback is in terms of no grant, half the grant or a proportion and depending on what people want we will work with that.

POr queried the reserve price as having this means that it makes it difficult to discover what people need. Like the idea of not having to go through a grant scheme but not sure what is gained if nobody comes forward. Maybe there is a different way of discovering that for the future. Could gather together and discuss with practitioners and developers about what they would like to see as an alternative approach.

AG thanked all for the useful feedback that will be passed on to the Woodland Carbon Guarantee project team. In terms of why we are doing this it is useful to use this as a test bed and a discovery auction is one of those key reasons and looking at the appetite for private funding as opposed to public funding.

CW confirmed that the reason for attempting to find a carbon price without grant relates to what might happen in the future in carbon markets so we're trying to discover what the price might be. We are doing work around how much people are paying for carbon in the marketplace at the moment to see if we can add some surety to the woodland carbon market, so you can see what price you might get but also what price you might pay.

SRh advised in terms of the interface with grants generally and introducing more flexibility to meet additional requirements is already being explored. In terms of the guarantee, need to flag this is not yet agreed government policy and is something that is being looked at as to whether we want to take it forward and are getting a feel for the market in terms of private versus public funding. Seeking a feel for whether it is worth it or something to be looked at further down the line. It's a question of whether and when.

JW added that looking at making EWCO more flexible in terms of working with carbon money and other options with people having the option of not taking up the additional contributions and looking at flexibility with people voluntarily taking up less of the grant than they are eligible for to qualify for additionality.

Review of Wader & Peat Guidance Notes

CT presented Wader slides.

NP commented that it's great to see the research that has been done and covering the concerns that have been raised by the uplands team.

JD good to see looking at other countries and potentially why they have been able to support woodland and waders and how that might be spatially located in the landscape.

ND commented from RSPB that colleagues have worked on the chance to engage with this review process and welcome the guidance as a step forward but still work ongoing thinking about identifying wader recovery areas.

CT commented regarding wader recovery zones, that these would provide clarity within identified areas, where we know there's going to be sensitivity and additional surveys required. wader recovery zones are not included as part of the project but currently these zones are being developed by Natural England and Defra and will be incorporated into future guidance.

CT presented Peat Slides

NP asked a question regarding point in the guidance about potential for lower density establishment in consultation with FC – a sentence at the bottom of the decision tree and it would be useful to have some further guidance around this.

CT advised it has been fed back. The issue is not to make guidance too long, so it is not accessible but also not too short so it's not sufficiently robust. So it cannot cover every possible scenario. Low density planting will be looked at as part of review and we will try and get more clarity. There will be an element, where conversations between NE, FC and

the applicant are necessary to ensure a way forward. After re-launch CT will work with NE and FC advisors, to ensure a uniform approach and will also support case work.

NE advised that they held a local event with TAPD, NE, FC, Rivers Trust and may be worth picking up with team member regarding this to see if there is any learning.

CT to pick up with **NE** regarding this.

ACT presented the Forest to Bog restoration tool slides.

DL commented that it is really interesting and looking longer term it could be used more widely as a land use-based management tool.

NE (from chat) Broader question, for both this and woodland management interventions will grants be based on non-market social goods? Will payment incentives for this be based on the market goods that the site would provide in the future.

ACT advised it has been looked at in terms of opportunity costs based on whether you would have to maintain a woodland or an open habitat. Asked NE whether other incomes available from maintaining a peat bog and none were raised that could be quantified. Not foreseeing maintenance payments.

CT commented there have been discussions with Defra regarding funding available to restore afforested sites to peatlands. When looking at the metric and costs of clearing a site. In most cases grant aid will not cover the costs of clearing and maintaining the site. This is where the metric will be useful as evidence of actual costs versus grant aid. It will also indicate to landowners the costs of returning sites to peatlands and then they can decide how to proceed.

JW commented it is good that we are looking at the cost but also important to understand the value of things such as the peat or water.

AOB

JW reminded AFG that slides were sent out about the Historic environment datasets for woodland creation and any comments/feedback should be sent to David Robertson at the following email address: historic@forestrycommission.gov.uk

Also next AFG is face to face in Birmingham on April 27th which is the day after ICF conference. If there are people that need to stay in Birmingham get in contact with JW and SL.

PO reminded AFG regarding the stakeholder call that occurs in afternoon after the AFG meeting.

Meeting ended 12:30