

Ref: AFG 04/2023

**AFG Minutes:** 27/04/2023**Location:** The Priory Rooms, Birmingham/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**Clive Thomas (Soil Association) **CT**John Bruce (Confor) **JB**Graham Clark (CLA) **GC**Cheryl Lundberg (RFS) **CL**Paul Orsi (Sylva) **POr**Simon James (Small Woods) **SJ**Nick Phillips (Woodland Trust) **NP**Geoff Newman (Natural England) **GN**Julian Ohlsen (SW AFG) **JO****FC/Defra:**Joe Watts (FC) **JW**Penny Oliver (FC) **PO**Ewan Calcott (FC) **EC**Sarah Lawson (FC) **SL**George Butcher (Defra) **GB**Harry Thacker (FC) **HT**Jim O'Neill (FC) **JON**Lucy Wyatt (FC) **LW**Kashya Zapala (FC) **KZ**Jasmeet Phagoora (Defra) **JP**

On line: Claire Douglas (RPA), James Russell (Community Forests), John Blessington (Local Government), Rory Lunny (Defra), Rebecca Waite (Defra), Fergus Starkey (NFU)

**Apologies:**

Jackie Dunne (Confor)

Alec Rhodes (FC)

Adrian Jowitt (Natural England)

Keith Jones (FC)

Brian Fraser (HTA)

Hugh Loxton (Defra)

Hannah Dawson (FC)

Daisy Ellis (Defra)

Poppy Sherborne (NFU)

Stan Abbott (Woodland Trust)

Steve Scott (FC)

Emily-Rose Milburn (Defra)

Anna Brown (FC)

## AFG Minutes

### Welcome

**JW** opened the session and welcomed all.

### Promotion & Engagement

**LW** presented the slides.

**DL** commented that the challenge is in getting the interest converted to applications. A number of landowners are keen but unsure where to start with grant process. It might be useful to look at number of applications done by farmers/landowners compared to those done by agents/consultants. The message is clear about potential benefits but need careful tailored advice for each farmer which costs money.

**LW** agreed with need to be cautious about not creating interest that can't be followed through on and should focus on end-to-end journey. Try to signpost to partners who can provide more of the hand holding through the process but that does depend on resources in each geographic location. Over the summer working on trying to create more resource on helping with how to complete the application.

**NP** queried about the numbers of engagement and the numbers of conversions. Whether there are parts of the toolkit that may engage lower numbers but may be higher conversions and whether there are any patterns?

**LW** commented that the team is still fairly immature in terms of tracking conversions. But in examples where the group is small they are incredibly keen and so see benefit in the small scale and having more ability to tailor and make more bespoke in a small geographical area.

**GG** requested that when engaging and planning engagement ensure that there is engagement with forestry agents and not just land agents. Also commented that some of literature is geared towards farmers but looks very forestry and seems to be some resistance among farmers. Has there been any research into how well the message is being received within the farming community? Thinking it may be worth co-branding literature with someone with more established credibility in farming community.

**LW** commented that creating joint material is something that they would like to look at doing more and creating this would be really valuable. Regarding the forestry agents conscious that they have expertise and felt land agents are less 'converted' but take on board the point.

**JR** commented regarding the variety in knowledge and expertise within agents and professional services around the country and seems to be an unconscious bias to work where there is strength already. Would be interesting to reflect on where there is low tree cover which may suggest a weak sector in terms of forestry. However means there are great opportunities (for example in woodland creation) but might currently have weak agent infrastructure so need to create a better balance to prevent inevitable bias to areas where there is a stronger sector.

**LW** commented that this was an interesting point and one that would be taken away to think about.

**JR** also commented that the FC is one of several entities currently trying to deliver on government targets and woodland creation partnerships sit delivering in parallel and need to make sure the different interests are being served alongside own strand of activity in P&E work.

**LW** responded that there has not been enough done in terms of joint content. Defra is supporting P&E work of delivery partners and need to ensure not all working separately and creating a joined up approach.

**JO** commented that it would be good to see financial and economic study in relation to UK sawmilling industry. Concern with having a number of woodland creation models and put those to landowners, whereas in past if someone is considering planting trees would look at objective of ownership and match woodland design to fit. Also need to build resilience into everything we do and make sure the advice is right to ensure this.

**LW** commented that she is conscious that there is a gap regarding the resilience in the promotional material and hoping to address some of this in the autumn.

**CT** acknowledged how fast this has moved on, not just in terms of content but also in the language and way it is presented. In terms of language and thinking this through from farmers viewpoint, right tree right place feels like a defensive message. The third part – right reason often gets missed but a lot of themes start with this. To go straight into right tree right place is often not the right way to engage farmers. So feel there is more work to do. Also echo David's point about working on application process so that it can genuinely be attempted by somebody different to our normal applicants.

**GC** asked if any consideration is being given to campaigns/material that put productive timber as a focus.

**LW** commented that they were trying to address this with Woods mean Business covering timber, wood fuel, carbon and recreation so has been part of number of potential different income streams but hasn't had sole focus. This will be partly addressed in management campaign but will be something to consider and look at how can facilitate contacts with the industry experts and getting that message across so this is something can be taken away.

**CL** commented that it has been highlighted that farming and forestry being seen as two separate disciplines and whether this has always been the case. There is an opportunity to get into a person's space and understand their needs and engage with them. This takes time but now have brilliant resource to show what you can offer but need to take the time to connect with farmers and understand their needs, how we can help them.

**LW** commented that there is an awareness and have been farming for foresters courses in some areas and it is important to share knowledge between teams, but it is definitely something we could do more of.

**NE** commented that it all seems very safe and how do we generate different ideas from different people. There is a danger of getting too corporate/government and could we use TCAF partners to make a difference. How could we get others to become part of the discussions?

**LW** responded that like to think there is some of this going on – probably more in regional teams. Not sure how much FC can be the one who is not safe/nice as an unbiased objective government organization.

**JB** advised that he was involved in the Community Tree scheme that was run for years and showing you will be there for ongoing support really helps. With the schemes run they were small but kept simple and flexible and also the value of free is important. Small numbers of free trees given away but the value of free outweighs the cost of free.

**LW** agree that free goes a long way so continue to make use of that where we can, but not doing it a huge amount.

**ND** commented that it is welcome to see one focus of campaign is nature. Hopefully people going across material and taking opportunities to use different parts in different schemes. In terms of questions of economics (of case studies featured in the campaign), mentioned RSPB Hope Farm case study is looking at economics of agroforestry and happy to share a link. Also asked about promotion of the Woodland Wildlife toolkit in the campaigns.

**LW** commented that the Woodland Wildlife toolkit is something that people signposted to but sure there is more could do with it. Also agreed that campaigns are not binary and the hope is that people take away different things from different parts and hopefully these are then combined together.

#### Group Discussion

**SJ** commented regarding regionalization of engagement making case studies relevant to audience. Also commented FC are really well known and question is whether they are trusted by farmers? Also made a point regarding carefully crafting who we engage with to help with how it is received.

**JO** commented would like to see an acceleration of working together with the wider industry that is going through a huge amount of change. Currently a team is built up, they become skilled and then they leave. Need to ensure we're cross fertilizing so that have something that stands up under critical analysis of landowner. Also regarding silvaculture there is a huge amount of bad practice because people don't consider different rates of growth and how things are going to be managed in the future. We need to create new woodland with a view to future management.

**NE** commented regarding TCAF partners and feels there is a need for forums to look at how we could work together. In terms of ambassadors feel there is a need for them to be picked and paid, some within FC and some external.

**GG** commented regarding the commercial viability of promoting timber production on farms and usefulness of collaborative farmer groups and working through facilitation funds.

**JR** raised complexity issue and need for simplicity. Not sure the P&E work can solve this but has to promote and encourage engagement but need to keep message simple. Also commented on fragmented way in which different organisations talk to people about broadly the same things and somehow P&E work needs to be agnostic and we all make use of the same message.

**CT** questioned when FC should be working in partnerships? How much can others use the material content produced and translate it into own message and need some guidance on this. Also discussed how messaging can be developed. Possibly best starting with what's already on the farm and raise awareness of the benefits that farmers are already getting and this may be a better entry point with farmers and then move on from there.

**DL** commented that challenge is to convert interest into schemes. The case studies don't provide enough detail if you are a farmer trying to work out the potential financial gains

but if the studies were linked more to actual schemes and how they've been put together this may help those that are interested.

### ELM Agroforestry

**JON** presented slides.

**JR** (comment from chat) Don't we have a self-inflicted tension with any planting less than 20m wide not being eligible for woodland management grants in the future? Or can we see this fixed?

**JON** responded that may be eligible for agroforestry maintenance grants.

**GG** asked is it in FC/Defra ability to allow people in farm woodland scheme to elect to not to take any further payments at a certain point as wish to now graze woods. This would be a help in integrating farming and forestry community.

**POr** asked about how the regulations might work in terms of flexibility as if farmers have to go through felling process for example that might be seen as a hassle and off-putting so has this been considered?

**NP** find Agroforestry as a term can be confusing and asked about experiences with that.

**DL** commented in terms of the shelterbelts these aren't seen as it was impossible to get grant aid for shelterbelts, for anything under 20m. The advice issue is important and need to ensure that this is nice and easy as if it is complicated this will put people off.

**CT** and **JO** commented regarding wanting to look at the topics of permanency and any changes to the regulations.

**GN** presented slides.

**GB** presented slides.

**GG** questioned about reclassifying land in the higher intensity. Could be small trees and therefore wouldn't be occupying much area of land. Querying how land would be classified and raising that this seems to create a regulatory barrier.

**GB** advised the guidelines set a threshold of canopy cover at 20%. It's a national scheme and are allowing landowners the freedom to select tree species. They have to play safe as don't want canopy closing. Acknowledge that could create regulatory barrier and pivoting offer around this. Lower density offer is there for those wanting to try it out

and feel this is important for people to be able to see if it works for them. There is a policy team established to look at the regulatory landscape and will look to refine this when possible.

**JON** advised that they are exploring developing an Agroforestry land use code approach.

**ND** mentioned Hope Farm case study (<https://farmwildlife.info/2023/03/03/planning-woodland-and-tree-management-on-an-arable-farm/>) where there have been reports of strong increases in farmland bird numbers. There are bits of farm where plans are to remove tree cover and other parts to add it and thinking about how it goes towards delivering the wider benefits. In terms of thresholds Defra presented, said was not able to give a LINK view on these in the meeting, but highlighted potential for concerns around compatibility in such situations and whether it's an advice or regulatory issue.

**GN** commented that the lower threshold levels are without handholding and aware of issues/concerns and possible negative impact in such situations. It's in wider offer within CS to signpost people to correct area and if have farmland birds hoped that they will be sensitive to this within the process. In terms of lower threshold only wish to see this in arable and improved grassland at the moment.

**NE** asks whether can get Woodland Creation Planning Grant for any of this. If so, should it be included in WCPG now, can the language be changed in some of guidance and is there money for technical advice through WCPG.

**GB** advised capital support would be everything to establish agroforestry system. Currently there is work being done on support for an agroforestry creation plan. Also looking to make amendments to some of existing offers to cater for agricultural context.

**JR** (comment from chat)- The land use classification is also key for tax reasons. Landowners are quick to raise this concern for woodland creation, so if agroforestry wants to be attractive as a 'not quite woodland' way to deliver trees, you need to solve this tax/classification issue.

**CT** commented that regardless of what the terminology is decided upon, it needs to all make sense to the applicant so it can be put together. Also, in terms of regulations, some of systems will be funded through EWCO but what if objective is to run as an integrated system - how do we get to that place from regulatory perspective.

**JON** commented that Agroforestry has the whole spectrum represented and parts of it might sit in other standards so brings things that we need to consider.

**EC** commented from regulatory perspective: for the creation of woodland canopy, there is a sliding scale in terms of where FC, as the regulator, has an interest in starting to regulate that tree planting, and unfortunately EIA is agnostic in terms of type of tree cover (high forest, coppice, wood pasture etc.) being created. So, there is a challenge regulatory and policy wise. There is a serious question about land use due and tax purposes and whether we see it [agroforestry] as forestry, rather as some form of agriculture with woodland/ farming with trees. There is a bit more certainty in terms of the permanency question. Fruit/nut trees are exempt from needing a felling licence, however, a licence will be required for other trees and this raises question of permanency. If a tree is felled under licence, there is an expectation it will be replaced and this expectation is a policy aspect, not a legislative one, and decisions are broadly dictated by the Open Habitats policy. Risk exists in creation of priority habitats (wood pasture) that can add to that habitat inventory and then can lead to them becoming protected 'by the back door'. There are knock on effects in terms of understanding the bigger picture and implications for land managers can be complex.

**DL** asked about how capital grants and future maintenance might work.

**GB** confirmed they are looking at tree planting offer. Wanting to make amendments so suitable for agricultural context. Capital provide through similar to CS - reimbursed for trees and fences and then maintenance payment will be a yearly revenue payment for as long as system exists. Compliance will be making sure trees are healthy.

**NP** queried the idea of allowing farmers to select own species as concerned those that are inexperienced may choose crops that may be unsuitable. It would be useful to have an agreed species list as guidance for farmers.

**GB** advised all landowners signposted to support tools to ensure that they are planting the right species for their area. Those in high sensitivity area given advice to support tree species choice. A species diversity bonus created to encourage a variety of species, however starting point is the EWCO tree list.

**POr** asked about the specialist stage and where will the advice come from. How will others be upskilled?

**GB** responded that assume that market is limited so supporting drive of agroforestry so others will upskill and create more support. Those involved are passionate and creating demonstrations. We are actively thinking about support and how we can connect as many people to this as possible.



**JO** commented that need to learn from mistakes about how to get land from a current scheme into agroforestry so hopefully this is being considered as well as looking at rules and how this might affect what's going forward.

**GB** confirmed that offer being produced to work with regulatory landscape that we have now. Have ambitions to change that in order to suit agroforestry but this will take time, but feel there is value to get the offer out now to get people interested as well as seeing how people react and learning from this.

**RL** commented regarding tree species to advise that forest research is working on Defra funded project looking at species based on EWCO list and other evidence to create list of species that are suitable in UK.

**GC** commented that tax status is really important issue for landowners and as far as we can keep away from the land use boundary the less controversial it will be for landowners and more interest will have from farmers.

**GB** acknowledged that there are implications of changing land use especially tax status. Seems large barrier but hoping that if take interest in low density offer and wet their appetite to raise their interest and over time may add to it.

**EC** commented regarding land classification and not overstating what EIA does. Measure of woodland canopy comes into place through National Forest Inventory, which excludes agroforestry at the moment. It's a more appropriate data source point to identify whether land is in agricultural use or under woodland canopy. So rather than focusing on whether it needs an EIA decision, we need to look at dividing line between agriculture/forestry.

**CT** raised integration point need to think about it how integrated into communication and if planning to roll out next year, need to start messaging it now.

**JON** confirmed that all issues raised are in the melting point and all being looked at. We are working with policy team to working on making regulatory landscape more defined for agroforestry.

### **Sustainable Farming Incentive – Woodland Pilot: Initial Findings**

**HT** presented slides.

**CT** asked if anything was done to raise awareness with the participants regarding the benefits they might get from their woodland. Motivation for creating woodland is environmental/social but barrier is often economic so would be great to hear about what people think about their existing woodland.

**HT** responded that there were a lot of questions about objectives and a lot of emotive and open questions. We are taking an empathetic approach and going into the field to understand things from the landowners' point of view, on their terms. Need to start with credibility and allow people to understand what they have, to have a try and hope they then want to proceed further, but it is important to get the simple things right.

**DL** commented that it's great to see the farm woodland included in this and being supported in the future. Don't know how we arrived at figure of £49 per ha but compared to the multi annual option of £100 per ha it seems minimal. Other comments: 15% of open space – can see where the guideline came from but think it has to be tailored to the wood. 20 cubic metres of dead wood per ha would be hard to calculate. £100 for woodland condition assessment – if you need to bring in consultants then that's another cost to cover so it needs to be basic but then is it worth having.

**HT** responded that with SFI didn't want it to be one size fits all, it's supposed to be more autonomous. We wanted to give people the option of doing assessment at different levels and there was no right or wrong way of doing it.

**POr** asked about whether the term 'tree planting' is woodland creation? Also what did people do that didn't use the main template?

**HT** confirmed that tree planting referred to woodland creation. In terms of the templates, people did various different things. There was a steer towards some guidance but there was no right or wrong.

**JO** asked about the deadwood figure and if this is appropriate as you want a percentage left on site. A lot of people with small woodlands see woodland management as clearing everything up and spend time telling them of benefits of deadwood and need to get them to do the right thing.

**HT** commented not all woodlands are the same and not one size fits all. It's hard to keep an eye on it and need to educate. Can't use blanket approach as can be complicated.

**NP** asked about the woodland condition assessment and whether the methodology or the commonality in the approach was sufficient to use at national level for FC.

**HT** responded that you could get some information from it but skill level of person doing it varied, some people had to get extra help to complete the template. Key questions are what we want to get out of these sections and what farmer wants to get out of it. What do they need? The condition assessment is a starting point.

**EC** commented from a regulatory perspective, SFI option is absolute value for money as it gets people thinking about what they have on their land already and where they want to go with it. England has so much woodland that is undermanaged, so worth getting people to stop and think about it.

**HT** agreed and commented if can hit a large group and effect a small change might create a bigger change.

**ND** queried regarding deadwood as to whether there is an opportunity for Woodland Wildlife toolkit to be used as guidance.

**HT** commented that there was guidance to work from but it was up to people whether they took this on board and what works for them.

**CT** flagged shouldn't lose sight of relationship with small woodlands and UKFS and one to discuss further at a later date.

**GG** asked if it is identified that a felling licence is required are they given any assistance with this? As supposed to be self-supporting is there a handover to woodland officer. Also asked whether this would bring a lot of extra woodland into the statistics as woodlands in management.

**PO** need to be careful as outside our everyday work. Trying to engage with people and conduct that learning but not saying we wouldn't follow up if people want us to follow up but needs to come from the participant.

**JW** confirmed that this wouldn't fall under the classification of Woodlands in Management for the key performance indicator.

**JB** commented that there still seems to be quite a lot of neutral and negative feelings about woodlands within the pilot group and did you get a feel on how you might start changing the mindset and making farmers feel positive about planting and managing woodlands.

**HT** answered that a lot of farmers feel like they are being blamed for the environmental crisis and listening to their concerns is really important as is understanding what they want to get out of it. There is a lot of work to do and need to understand objections and work with them.

## Environmental Outcome Reports (EOR) & Hedgerow Regulations

**EC** presented slides.

**POr** raised who will be best to look after Hedgerow Regulations. Local Authorities as a resource have been massively depleted but possibly an opportunity to build them up again and regulate through LAs. Would have local knowledge that could be drawn upon.

**GG** contradicted this and commented that Hedgerow Regulations are applied nationally. LAs would concentrate on specific character of an area.

**EC** advised there is a [Defra] strategic coordination group of ALB regulators and they are looking at this in terms of farm inspections. The RPA will continue to do this work and will start inspecting more farms as all farms will fall into scope, not just those receiving subsidies.

**JB** commented LAs not experts on hedgerows and won't fight for right to do inspections. Not viewed as local authority task. Vast majority of those saved are historic and usually that is the only contact LAs have with farmers. Someone else like Defra who has contact in other matters may be better placed.

**GC** asked whether it effects earlier stages of EIA process and how could lead to possible secondary legislation coming forward.

**EC** advised that the intention is to bring forward EIA reform legislation, but FC can't do that yet until other legislation (the LURB) is in place as this will unlock all the EIA regimes. We didn't 'lift and shift' the EU directive when we 'lifted and shifted' the various EIA regimes, and so we are unable to modify regulation until we go through this process.

## **AOB**

**JW** reminded group of the dates of the next couple of meetings – 8<sup>th</sup> June and 20<sup>th</sup> July.

Also discussed the possible re-naming of the group to ensure it remains relevant. Further information regarding this and suggested names will be sent out to the group.

Meeting ended 15:00