

Ref: AFG 06/2023

AFG Minutes: 08/06/2023**Location:** Webinar/teleconference**Chair:** Joe Watts**Secretary:** Sarah Lawson**Attendees****AFG Members:**Neil Douglas (RSPB) **ND**Neville Elstone (Cumbria Woodlands) **NE**Graham Garratt (ICF) **GG**Poppy Sherborne (NFU) **PS**Graham Clark (CLA) **GC**James Russell (Community Forests) **JR**Julian Ohlsen (SW AFG) **JO**Nick Phillips (Woodland Trust) **NP**Simon James (Small Woods) **SJ**Paul Orsi (Sylva) **PO**Cheryl Lundberg (RFS) **CL**Adrian Jowitt (Natural England) **AJ**Brian Fraser (HTA) **BF****FC/Defra:**Joe Watts (FC) **JW**Penny Oliver (FC) **POI**Sarah Lawson (FC) **SL**Alec Rhodes (FC) **AR**Mark Stevenson (FC) **MS**Melanie Edgar (Defra) **ME**Camilla Morrison-Bell (FC) **CMB**Jake Simpkins (FC) **JS**Rory Lunny (Defra) **RL**Rebecca Waite (Defra) **RW**Amelia Hood (Defra) **AH**Sophie Ward (Defra) **SW**

Heather Gibbard (FC) (observing)

Apologies:

Keith Jones (FC)

Jackie Dunne (Confor)

Hugh Loxton (Defra)

David Lewis (RICS)

Claire Douglas (RPA)

John Bruce (Confor)

Steve Scott (FC)

Stan Abbott (Woodland Trust)

Clive Thomas (Soil Association)

Richard Bridge (Defra)

AFG Minutes

Welcome

JW opened the session and welcomed all.

Discussion on the proposed amendments on the control and management of deer, grey squirrel and other species within the ELM schemes

ME presented slides.

ME has asked for topic not to be detailed in minutes due to sensitivity.

Proposed Changes to Open Habitats Policy

MS presented slides.

GG commented that there seems to be some confusion between the use of deforestation and PAWS restoration. The PAWS restoration often becomes more productive rather than less. Shouldn't this all be about what society wants from its land which may or may not be woodland? Raised a query regarding where the evidence has come from. Britain is one of the most nature depleted countries in the world and if you lose a few thousand tons of timber it's probably a small component of our overall productivity. It seems a reactive defensive approach to an old policy that is about producing timber not about what society wants from its land.

MS accepts point that PAWS restoration can make trees more productive. The data isn't perfect and can be difficult to be definitive about the productivity of an area of commercially productive woodland only that it's likely to be going down. Also accept the point about looking at what society wants and believe that is what we are trying to do is come up with a sensible balance and it is our duty to maintain growing reserves of trees together with nature conservation.

JO commented that if we are removing commercially productive woodland it should be replaced with the same otherwise we won't have a resilient potential timber resource in the future.

MS responded that point about compensatory planting noted.

JR commented that definitions are absolutely crucial and productive can be interpreted in a number of ways. Need to ensure that we don't overlook the recent addition of

carbon productivity. There is concern that those promoting the application of the Open Habitats policy particularly around heathland aren't able to provide compensatory planting. Surely this needs to be challenged. Also in terms of JO's comment consideration should be given to a multiplier effect so on productive commercial plantations perhaps it needs to be replaced by twice what is being lost.

MS responded that it's worth looking at carbon and it highlights that it depends what you mean when you talk about productive woodland. Also commented that the requirements of the policy is for like for like compensation but larger area of lower yielding crop which is still productive is worth looking at.

NE noted that the data suggests that current incentives for PAWs aren't working. Need to have a good look at the incentives. Also we are seeing people reluctant to remove conifers from PAWs sites but then planting native woodlands next door and we should be encouraging them to plant conifers on their bare land and convert the PAWs into broadleaf, so the incentives aren't really working and need some review.

MS commented that PAWs are outside the Open Habitats policy but there are opportunities to look at the issues raised.

ND commented that PAWs restoration is something that we want to see and it is a concern in terms of where SAC boundaries have been drawn around existing woodlands. Queried whether that exceptional value is considered on sites where it's reconnecting SAC sites or has particular importance in terms of connectivity. Also, in terms of the point about compensatory planting, don't think ever been against the idea at strategic level and the need to compensate for losses but in terms of site level some will find it difficult to find land.

MS commented that the landscape context point is interesting and one to be taken back to executive committee. Our control over this is through the felling licence and that requires the landowner to have control over the land so strategic solutions are much more difficult but is something to be looked at.

NP commented that it doesn't feel like the right area to screw down on policy. Most landowners don't have the money to buy extra land or do compensatory planting. Feel that NE's point about linking incentives is a better way and creates links between grants. Think there are ways you can support increasing productive woodland but also support the open habitat restoration.

MS reiterated that we are trying to get a better balance between what society wants and what our statutory obligations are.

JW raised **JD**'s question – concern about quality as much as quantity: does this include an analysis of restocking (including the stems per hectare) on SPHN sites, restocking on ash dieback sites, loss of restocking area in peat buffer areas, loss of restocking after Storm damage?? I am very concerned about loss of woodland due to the afore mentioned. Tree Health Pilot being a group scheme for restocking is clunky to say the least.

AJ agreed that productivity can be measured in a number of ways. Need to consider that many of the woodlands that are being looked at for restoration to Open Habitats are managed by organisations who have no intention of managing that timber resource commercially. Need to consider that not all conifer plantations are going to be productive, there is a lot of conifer that isn't being managed and it's not straight forward.

MS confirmed that the policy it is currently sitting with Defra for a steer. He would be going back to the committee with all of this information and recommending some refinements and then hopefully can look to implement over the coming months.

Landscape Recovery Round 2 Opening

CMB presented slides.

GG asked if format is being rolled into ELMs? Does it have to be a combined application if the applicant is big enough in their own right – can it be single or does it have to be in partnership? Also queried whether it had to be new habitats or could it be progression for habitats that may have been created under HLS or CS.

CMB confirmed on first point that that it was and thinks it has eight rounds. Confirmation also given that could have a single applicant as long as application is greater than 500 hectares. Also confirmation that as well as creation there is talk of maintenance and support of existing wildlife rich habitats and protected sites.

NP wanted to query whether there was flexibility if a partner were to drop out, particularly if you have an application with a broad range of different stakeholders as flexibility would be important. Also looking to get an understanding how applications would be required to do private finance. It is important to get across to landowners how this might work from their perspective. Another question would be why and need to ensure getting across all the benefits opposed to going through a big EWCO scheme (where wouldn't need private finance).

CMB responded in terms of private finance which is one of the eight deliverables they have to produce as part of PDP, there will be significant amount of guidance and support

for projects in developing that and this is something Defra is currently looking at. It will be up to the project to budget appropriately but they will get support in what that looks like and requirements. In terms of the point about flexibility, there has been a significant amount of change during the enrolment in terms of who initially signed up and who made it to the end of enrolment. Some have highlighted that people will be brought in at a later date so there is flexibility to bring stuff in and for people to drop out. In terms of dropping out this has to be done early on and within a certain level. It could get to a point where it is re-evaluated. Flexibility during implementation phase is something Defra is aware of and will have been negotiated. All projects need to build in time to monitor, review and in terms of payments will be built into finance plan, but the need for flexibility is something that we are aware of.

JR queried about urban, peri urban, urban fringe landscapes as seems to be no reference to proximity to people in terms of those landscapes so feel that needs clarification. Also queried regarding scale as understand that there is no upper limit and feel that potentially there is a tension regarding scale of ambition and impact and that works. Also commented regarding 20 year contracts and querying how you provide for change within that timeframe as it is a big commitment that some landowners may feel to be high risk.

JS agreed with the points raised about peri urban. It's a good point that the narrative doesn't represent it and something to take on board for future rounds. It's definitely eligible and have seen a couple of projects from first round. In the social criteria when looking at access and engagement those sites can do really well.

JS also mentioned in terms of the scale that there was talk about capping some development phase funding to try and not make it a free-for-all but yet to see what that might look like. The idea was to try and include some really ambitious large scale projects. Hopefully we can look to bring in some of the community forest projects into landscape recovery in the future.

NE agrees with James and have concerns over urban, peri urban forestry. Also have concerns over woodland scrub conversion and that this isn't in the scoring. Also concerns over deadweight which isn't being scored.

JS commented that in regards to the deadweight it is something that they are aware of and have considered whether these projects would be happening anyway. Think there is potential for landscape recovery and leeching out of benefits so landowners start talking to each other and getting involved with those around them. So we are not scoring at the moment but something to think about.

PO queried about the private financing and if projects can mix government and non government sources.

CMB confirmed that it is about bringing in the private finance element into government. Defra is funding this but projects have to bring in some private finances too.

JW clarified that it wouldn't be a mix of EWCO grants and LR grants in same area. It would be private finance and LR.

CL from chat: are there any pre-determined target areas on the government's agenda which can help focus efforts on this? eg based around water catchment management

CMB responded that for landscape recovery - no there aren't in the first or second round. Its dependent on who applies and meets criteria.

EWCO and WCPG Updates

AR presented slides.

JO commented that it is good to see the feedback being addressed however is a little disappointed that applications can't be done online. There have been issues with lost applications and if we had a common server that we could all see the progression it would streamline the whole process. In terms of consultation, it needs to be 28 days and no extensions given as there is no time for this. Also advised that in terms of implementation, this should happen as soon as possible and flagging up future changes.

AR aware that the issues about online applications has been flagged and we see the value however there are some challenges about meeting government standards and whether it is fit for purpose. It's taking longer than anticipated to get the back end system ready. But understand the point about visibility for applicants as this would save us enquiries. If there are any issues about lost applications let us know as we want to ensure that this is tightened up. In terms of consultation, this would need to be deferred to Ewan and can't answer further on that one.

JW confirmed that this would be re-visited with the group. Also in terms of the multiple/single launch, think it is going to be multiple launches and get as much benefit out there as we can now and then as and when we have further changes to make we can bring these out.

ND asked if waders guidance will still apply in this green channel approach and also looking at a bit of the process that happens up to that point talks about adjacent

projects up to 500m. Does that mean that potentially that is a sort of buffer for some of this stuff around reserves. Also is there a size limit or threshold for use of green channel.

AR still some work to do around green channel and potentially links with Ewan Calcott's work on strategic EIA. Impact on wading birds will be part of decision making and want to respect that framework that has been developed and won't want to undo any of the work that has been done. Size threshold is something to be determined can look to EIA to help guide that but guess sometimes it comes down to scale and comes back to those two options. Can leave it to woodland officers to make some of those decisions or help them by looking at the sensitivity mapping and using this to predetermine some of the outcomes.

AFG name change

JW advised that the proposed name for the group going forward would be 'Forestry Commission Delivery Advisory Group' (FC DAG) and asked if there were any objections which there weren't and so will work with that.

AOB

JW reminded the group that the next meeting is on 20th July, then 31st August and next face to face meeting is on 12th October.

Meeting ended 12:32