

Ref: FCDAG 04/2024

DAG Minutes: 18/04/2024**Location:** The Birmingham & Midland Institute/ teleconference**Chair:** Joe Watts**Secretary:** Sarah Lawson**Attendees****DAG Members:**Andrew Weatherall (RSPB) **AW**Graham Garratt (ICF) **GG**Poppy Sherborne (NFU) **PS**James Russell (Community Forests) **JR**David Lewis (RICS) **DL**Luke Hemmings (NPFGB) **LH**Neville Elstone (ICF) **NE**Simon James (Small Woods) **SJ**Julian Ohlsen (SW AFG) **JO**Paul Orsi (Sylva) **POr**

Online: Cheryl Lundberg (RFS) **CL**, Brian Fraser (HTA) **BF**, Adrian Jowitt (Natural England) **AJ**, Nick Phillips (Woodland Trust) **NP**, John Bruce (Confor) **JB**, John Blessington (Local Gov) **JBI**, Nick Rowles (Local Gov) **NR**

FC/Defra:Joe Watts (FC) **JW**Sarah Lawson (FC) **SL**Stephanie Rhodes (FC) **SR**Anna Brown (FC) **AB**Evelina Budriko (FC) **EB**Alec Rhodes (FC) **AR**Penny Oliver (FC) **PO**Robin Gray (FC) **RG**Vicki Howlett (FC) **VH**Melanie Jane Edgar (Defra) **MJE**Rebecca Waite (Defra) **RW**Louise Alexander (FC) **LA** (observer)

Online: Ann Weddle (FC) **AWe**, Emma Spencer (Capgemini) **ES**, Vicky Brazier (Defra) **VB**, Iain Turnbull (RPA) **IT**, Clayton Bull (Defra) **CB**

Apologies:

Clive Thomas (Soil Association)

Jackie Dunne (Confor)

Barnaby Coupe (Wildlife Trusts)

DAG Minutes

Welcome

JW opened the session and welcomed all.

EWCO Delivery in 23/24

EB (Head of Operations (Forest Services), Forestry Commission) presented slides.

LH commented that had experience of the Crown Estates pilot and this was really positive and the more we can extend that approach the better. Also wanted to confirm regarding the single point of contact and how this fits in with the area teams.

EB confirmed we have Operations team managers that are single point of contact for each area team and they support with caseloads. The Area Operations Managers collate all information and enquires from within their teams and they feed that into Operational Delivery Managers and we can also then disseminate information through them.

POr asked how the Crown Estates pilot linked to the Woodland Creation Fast Track.

AB confirmed that it was the precursor to the Woodland Creation Fast Track.

LH advised that low risk areas were taken from a group of estates and looked at these with woodland officers to confirm they were low risk and did a consultation exercise but it was pushed up the processing ladder as it was straightforward and already been checked for various constraints.

EB confirmed that these were supported and it allowed identification of how quickly the application process could be processed if minimal constraints.

JO commented that the admin side in Bristol that was all very swift but it is the process before then that we lose a single contact and took a long time. It was surprising that once the offer was made there was no follow up with a formal agreement document.

EB responded that she could take that away and review.

AR commented that the process is the offer is made and that includes the agreement and so acceptance of the offer is accepting the agreement.

JR commented that the improvements sound good but just want to make sure that when creating a centralised process to become more efficient, how do you ensure that it

doesn't become a depersonalised process. The single point of contact sounds great, however with the idea of call centres and online processes need to make sure that you don't lose that personal connection and wonder how you are mitigating that risk.

EB advised that the call handlers in Bristol are the answer to that, as the call is answered by the actual case worker. Following triage, you will speak to someone that has worked on your case and be able to provide an update. In terms of the technical work, the woodland officers will still do site visits. We are just working behind the scenes to streamline rather than take away the contact because that's important.

LH commented that he wasn't aware of the number they could call and will now be promoting that. It would be ideal if we could view the grant management system and go in and view where a case is online. If we could see notes to understand the progress on a case it would be really useful, particularly with Woodland Creation Planning Grant to help us keep track on things.

SR commented that we need to work on GMS to deliver what we need it to do for us and then work on how we can make it more accessible and of greater use to you within the constraints of government digital requirements but we can work something out in the not too distant future.

WCPG Development

VH (Incentives Development Manager, Forestry Commission) and **RG** (Landscape & Woodland Design Advisor, Forestry Commission) presented slides.

AW asked if there was an example of what a good design looks like on the website, for those that don't know so that they are aware of the minimum expectation.

RG commented that perhaps this is one to take away as there are sometimes issues with sharing plans and accessibility issues on gov.uk.

AR agreed that this could be taken away. In the past we have published examples in [A guide to planning new woodland in England](#). Possibly we are missing something that shows if you have a scheme that doesn't have many constraints what is the minimum you can do but still achieve UKFS compliance and think this is something we need to look at.

DL commented that this could be taken a stage further and have case study showing each stage with accompanying plans so that applicants have a clear idea of expectations and to show what a good design looks like from start to finish. This would be helpful particularly for those who don't put in many applications.

VH advised that there are currently example maps on gov.uk for each of those different plans but maybe need to look at how we can improve these and raise more awareness of this.

Link to examples: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/woodland-creation-design-plan-example-documents>

LH asked would Stage 2 planning grant still be paid if you end up going through Fast Track. Asked if the landscape element is the only aspect that is expected to be further developed through stage 2 under the fast track or if there are other things that might also need a bit of extra work. Sounds promising and feels as though it won't increase the time taken that much because we are already consulted on these changes. In terms of the proportionate issue, it would be good to understand if there will be clear expectations around how much is needed depending on the size of the scheme or if it will be down to individual feedback from the case officer. It needs to be predictable and so we can give an idea to clients about how much work is going to be involved.

AR commented that the Stage 2 payment is a difficult one. Currently we offer that payment for the preparation of those plans and also the analysis that an applicant goes into when they fill out a Stage 2 checklist. We want to streamline it as much as we can but landscape is everywhere. The products that have been presented are how we bring together the design and all the constraints. We have to retain that thinking in the process. Our starting point is that we wouldn't make the Stage 2 payment or it would be reduced to reflect the amount of work that is required to the bare minimum.

RG in terms of Stage 2 it may not be landscape per se, it may be woodland design that incorporates landscape context, biodiversity, historic environment etc. It's ensuring we've got the optimum design which covers the client's objectives but is also UKFS compliant. In terms of our guidelines always trying to cover all bases but looking at the straightforward schemes maybe we need to work on guidelines that gives you that basic scheme but will inevitably come with lots of caveats.

JB asked for clarity regarding around the WCPG and whether the consult only once approach is happening now. Also asked about timescales around the consultation period as it sounded as though it is going to take longer.

VH responded that formal consultation isn't currently a part of the planning grant process but looking to bring it in around July. When it is brought in, it will mean that the process doesn't need to be repeated if someone goes on to apply to EWCO the formal consultation element wouldn't need to be repeated provided nothing has changed. In terms of the time period, it is not that consultation will increase it by 7-8 months. This is

an average time we are looking at from when we initially receive the WCPG application to get to the point we have a UKFS compliant design plan. In terms of the formal consultation process itself there is the public register which is now 21 days and the historic environment notification element so about a month extra.

JBI commented that the web-based consultation system lacks a lot in the way of local accountability and feel there is a deficit at local level. Also commented that there is plenty of locally significant elements of landscape that are of interest outside of designated areas. Landscape is local and consultation should be local, allowing everyone to have their say.

JW commented that the online version is the end of the consultation and not the only consultation. We would expect applicants to be doing other consultation before they even submit their plans.

RG agreed that landscape value doesn't end with a designated landscape. For example, there is as much value in terms of a locally distinctive area which is important to residents and the local area.

CL commented regarding the discussion points – should we add optional questions to collect information for EWCO is definitely yes. Representing a broad spectrum of applicants from owners through to agents, the more you can prompt and the more information you can include the better. The additional contribution eligibility again is a yes. This would be helpful to support applicants from all sorts of backgrounds. In terms of integrating the WCPG with the EWCO application is going to be ideal if you can almost treat them as one and the WCPG application is frontloaded. There will be plenty of applications which are straightforward and just need to be progressed but frontloading it into the EWCO application may generate more interest.

JO commented that it was positive bringing the EIA principle in but asked if the stakeholders involved are in agreement with it. Also asked about the application process being online as it would be good to be able to have visibility of the progress. Also landscape design versus owner's objectives is an interesting point as we have a scheme that we have been told that smaller fields are landscape features and can't be planted but as they aren't being farmed they are likely to revert to woodland eventually.

AR commented that it was something to work through with them. There are a few benefits to giving the EIA Opinion at the end; one is that the consultation is done and the Opinion in place and an applicant can then take that wherever they want to take it. The other thing is it gives that regulatory approval on the scheme and it can then proceed if there are no changes.

AJ commented that although he agrees with creating a smooth system there is a concern that the earlier in the process we bring in EIA, there is more time for the scheme to change and the issue is also the degree of change and this needs to be worked through. Need to make sure that what's been signed off under EIA or other forms of consultation isn't changed in such a way that it invalidates anything and need to agree some sort of sensitivity.

RG commented regarding the fields that may be part of important cultural heritage and covered in UKFS under pattern of enclosure. It is important to retain the most important or significant examples but that it may not be necessary to retain all of them (for example, ridge and furrow).

JR asked for clarification regarding the consult-once process as it was mentioned about it working as people move into EWCO, but does it also apply regardless of how you choose to fund woodland delivery whether it is privately or taking up other major funding programmes. Also, there was reference to low sensitivity mapping version 4 and 3 so looking for clarification. In landscape consideration within FC, you grapple with existing designations like Community Forests where there is a public or politically endorsed vision for landscape scale afforestation that everyone has bought into and is captured by policy and queried if you use that as a different framework to consider within. Also, there was mention of issues about biodiversity and historic environment but there have been cases where we have received feedback on these issues when the schemes have already been signed off by experts so feels like there is a bit of duplication in that process.

VH clarified that there are different variants of version 4 so there is main version that we are expecting that 90% to be within, that remaining 10% we will allow to be in variant 3 of version 4. Also confirmed that the consultation only once in planning grant would apply to schemes other than EWCO.

RG commented that in terms of definition of landscape UKFS uses the European Landscape Convention definition and it does encompass cultural, social, land management elements within the landscape. There is a risk of treading on other professionals' toes and more often resolved at the area level, can lead to slight overlap.

DL commented regarding what is included in the WCPG as there are smaller schemes (1-5ha) that can involve a lot of work and yet are not eligible for funding and feel this needs to be looked at.

GG queried about land classification and asked if you are signposting people to that information.

JR commented that the dataset is on the online mapping but needs to be made clearer.

POr asked if as a landscape officer how you interact with people locally to provide support to applicants.

LH questioned how good we are at standing our ground when we believe in something or know we are correct and think we all need to be more proactive when things have been done properly. There will always be people that object due to subjective views. It would be great to see people being more forthright when we are acting in a way that is UKFS compliant and potentially having more back up from the FC on this.

SR commented there are questions around how it's going to work in practice and looking at how and when we are looking to implement the work. We need to work on the forward look and share this with you at the DAG so that we can work on the next steps of involving you in the implementation process.

EWCO Payment Rates

AWe (Incentives Development Manager, Forestry Commission) presented slides.

NE asked if the grant is based on income foregone plus costs how do you then increase the rates?

AR responded that EWCO is based on income forgone and cost model but we have to constrain our grants to make sure that we're not overcompensating on average and we have to consider how far we can stretch budget across the area we hope to plant. As a result we have constrained our EWCO payments to allow for some headroom so we are always working beneath the true cost.

GG commented that when the grant rates go up, we don't know when they are going to go up again or when they will be reviewed and it would be good to understand the mechanism behind this. It would be good to know if there is a systematic approach or if there is a constant review.

JW commented that within Defra and the FCP there is an aspiration to make the reviews more systematic and regular.

MJE commented that there has been a commitment to a three-year cycle of reviews. As there has been a lot brought out this year, we need to work out what gets reviewed at what point in that three-year cycle but the idea is that different bits of the offer get reviewed at different times but there will be a regular review process so that the payment rates are kept up to date and it will be more transparent for everyone.

DL commented that the £400 per ha is a welcome increase but feels like that is a contribution to the cost of maintaining the woodland and not income foregone. Also asked if we have a split between what would be the typical maintenance costs and what's left which in effect is towards the income foregone.

AR responded that we are trying to get to a point where we cover the cost but we're always constrained but not overcompensating on average.

JW responded that on the maintenance this is based on estimated costs. Income foregone is factored into the whole scheme not on a grant by grant basis.

SR commented that in the early days of EWCO, Rosa did a session and wondered if it was worth looking at doing some kind of refresh.

JR queried the air quality line and requested more information on this. Also commented that the Low Sensitivity incentive seems to contradict in policy terms with push on agroforestry. It feels like there are mixed messages and seems a bit confused.

AR commented that there is nothing in the pipeline to look at air quality. It was something that was looked at when EWCO was developed but there was some challenge around how to quantify and target it. In terms of the low sensitivity incentive versus the desire for agroforestry, with EWCO we are looking at land use change as a whole rather than with agroforestry systems there is still some agricultural production being retained.

SR commented that **AR** is correct but also there are some elements where there might be a marginal overlap and that is something that we would look to clarify because we don't want to cause confusion.

AW commented that it is great that there is an incentive for buffer zones around ancient woodland. Natural colonisation isn't the answer everywhere but takes pressure off nursery stocks and probably produces more structural diverse woodlands. Would like to see rather than equal incentive, a premium for natural colonisation. There are more upfront costs with planting but there are more longer-term costs with natural colonisation.

AR commented that we have tried to make natural colonisation as attractive as possible so taking the policy decision so it gets the same Additional Contributions even though perhaps the outcomes are a bit less certain and we have quite prescriptive design requirements for some of those payments. Comments about incentivising above planting are noted.

LH asked how you apply for additional contributions that have very specific design requirements and have natural colonisation.

AR working on assumption that natural colonisation will deliver so there is a degree of good faith that will get the regeneration and it will then be managed to meet the requirements.

LH asked if there had been any push back on the low sensitivity land from farming sector as incentivising people away from the hills on to better pastures. Feels as though being encouraged off the hills and on to the farmland. Also asked whether the highest rate of nature improvement works the same as the existing higher rate did. If you have an area of native woodland that's in the premium area as long as it's all linked together in your scheme, does it apply to the whole area or just the bits that are in the premium zone. Also sad to see no diverse timber production in this and would like to know what evidence is needed to bring something in.

AR advised that not aware of any push back but think that it is still settling in with people.

PS commented that NFU had discussions with Defra and Forestry Commission around the narrative about food production and land use change. Wanted to understand what is driving it and the effect the payments might have going forward. We haven't had any feedback as a result in terms of concerns that certain areas of land are not being targeted. Also in the land sensitivity mapping some of the upland areas where there might be concern are excluded.

AWe confirmed that the higher rate applies to the whole area and works in the same way as the existing nature recovery additional contributions.

NP commented that it makes sense to target creation next to ancient woodlands but asked when the next review point is for this to check if that approach has worked. Also huge amount of work going into EWCO and seen a few payment rises and query is whether there is a programme of work looking at grants aimed at existing woodland to make them as competitive as we can.

JW commented that **MJE** had alluded to the review cycle that is being looked at. Internally we will need to review whether the additional contributions changes have shifted the uptake.

GC asked if there was information available regarding on average how many additional contributions are coming through in individual applications. Also support **LH's** comment

regarding more thought being given to additional contributions around diverse productive timber.

JW commented that the comments about timber diversity additional contribution were noted and it would be useful to understand the ideas on that. Also we will try to disseminate more information about the additional contributions in terms of the mix we are getting through the applications.

AR commented that when looking at rate uplift we look at averages across the uptake and the stackability. We are seeing as an average, people stacking one/two in most cases.

LH asked if the geographic data had been looked at to see if rates are different around the country.

JW confirmed that there is more work to do on drilling down but have done some comparison of EWCO with CS beforehand and can see a behaviour shift in terms of the additional contributions moving people to create woodland with more benefits.

JO commented need to be careful of unintended consequences, one of which is the regular use of term income foregone and worry the HMRC will see it as taxable. Also, as benefits recognised through payments being made, it reduces some of options around carbon sales.

JW advised that we are aware and that is why there is flexibility and people have the option to not take up the additional contributions.

CS Higher Tier – Development of Guidance

MJE (Technical Policy Advisor, Defra) presented slides.

GG asked about timescales for the application window. When will it open as a lot of work to do ahead of an application. Also commented that looking at WS1 and WS3 agreements, there are some landscapes where the money will only sustain deer at the current level. There needs to be an additional landscape scale project to look at this.

MJE responded regarding the application window that the intention is to open applications later in the year. Sustainable Farming Incentive applications will open in July and that will go through a steady roll out and look to bring in Countryside Stewardship work. Looking to launch a few new things in the summer to support people to prepare for that application window opening including some new planning and new capital item support.

PO commented that hoping more information to come out when there's further information about what's going to be in SFI, that will be detailed about high level information on Higher Tier including pre application work. So it's really for us to be talking around management plans in readiness for when Higher Tier does open for applications. It will be a rolling window when it opens.

DL commented that it is good to see these additional supplements, however there are a number of people that have an existing woodland improvement payment but unable to access supplements and feels unfair and prejudiced against them. Also those with a ten year plan, if they apply for these supplements sometimes the plan will have expired by end of supplements and have to renew your management plan so will cause logistical struggles.

MJE responded that the aim is for things to be seamless, although we are aware that there will be challenges to overcome. For those in existing agreements that may be interested in the new supplements, we are currently developing a process to support people to move across and hoping to put more information out about this later in the year.

PO advised there is some programme wide guidance about how people can move between schemes, add new things and the flexibility. There is a lot of discussion going on around how it's actually going to work and need to be able to manage the applications as they are coming through in that rolling window. The ultimate aim is that we want to get much more flexibility so people can add things in. We may not be able to achieve that seamlessly to begin with, but the process is being looked at. Worth bearing in mind that deer and squirrel will be standalone options as well. On the management side of things, looking at the process and updating and amending woodland management plans so they are ready when the window does open.

NE commented that thinking in terms of co-design would it be beneficial to have a subset of this group to be involved to ensure that it's developed appropriately with the sector.

JW commented that we can take that away but with caveat would be the scheme rules around that rather than having a bespoke rule for woodland improvement so may need to manage expectations around that.

JO asked for guidance as lack of information to give landowners and mixed messages. No schemes to offer and allows people to not manage their woodlands. Also asked if the agreements will be five or ten years.

JB (from chat): I echo Julian's point with other Confor members also raising concern with this gap in applications for CS and uncertainly for their clients!

MJE responded that understands frustration and this has been fed back. We are aiming to get information published shortly in term of further information about hopefully when those dates will be finalised. The intention is for them to be ten-year agreements going forward with supplements to match that.

NE commented regarding income forgone plus cost that it was indicated that there are kind of sliders that can be moved presumably across a bell curve to make things happen.

MJE responded that income forgone plus cost calculations produces a cost curve and we work at 50th percentile of that cost curve as the average cost. For some cases there would justifications for moving up the cost curve so some actions have premium payments associated with them and this is to do with where we fall on that cost curve. Income foregone plus cost doesn't give you a fixed figure, it gives a curve that you find a position on and our standard position is the 50th percentile. There are conversations where we are not seeing the desired uptake about whether there should be movement up the curve.

NE commented that looking at the Forestry Commission's KPI outcomes, the existing woodland outcomes are not great and surely this is an argument to move the sliders. For example, PAWS restoration and there are people that would be happy to contribute to a discussion regarding moving the sliders and improve the KPIs.

NP (from chat): Plus 1 for Neville's point on a follow up action to review restoration grants option

PO commented that we could ask economists to say more but the PAWS payment is one of the few that does include an income foregone element.

JW commented that not disagreeing that there is work to be done but there is a case to be made that the payment rates and the structure of the grants have changed significantly this year and it may be worth seeing the uptake following this and see if the PAWS uptake has responded to those different payments.

MJE also commented that with the regular review cycle there is still work to do around that but the advantage is if you know that you are going to review the offer in three years you can work out what monitoring you need to check if the offer is working and what amendments are needed. Agree it is worth seeing if the new structure helps, but

will also take a note in terms of the monitoring and the requirements that we need to keep an eye on.

GG asked about ditching existing WD2 agreements and making new applications and is there not an option simply to get a supplement for something you already have a prescription agreed on. Sometimes it isn't that different, just more resource.

MJE responded that this is something that is being explored. The challenge is because the prescriptions are in the original WD2 payment for some older agreements, you get a dual funding issue. All of the prescriptions, bar a few, are moved around prescriptions from WD2 and where we have broken things down and put them in new spaces. There is something to explore about if have WD2 agreement with prescriptions agreed in it, if those align to the new supplements going forward whether this can be moved across, but there is a lot of work to be done around this to make it as smooth as possible.

POr commented that proper user research needs to be carried out. Also needs to be updateable easily as things can change quickly.

MJE responded that it was noted.

PS commented that it is hard to say exactly what the guidance should look like, not knowing what the offer will look like. On guidance point there is a lot of learning from CS mid-tier last year going online. There was a shock from some members who were used to applying by forms and weren't able to do that. For those that are new, explanation needs to be clear about what the steps are especially if there will be more responsibility on the applicant. It needs to be made clear to the applicant before they start the application what is needed. Screenshots, walk throughs, videos are useful but not everyone wants this or will be able to access this so a wide variety of methods of communication is probably the best approach.

JR commented that it is frustrating having to jump between links to find something simple. Feels fractured and accessing information is not very efficient and would favour trying to simplify that split out approach. Agree with **POr** that need genuine user research feedback. Also regarding the rolling window application asked if it has that been published anywhere and that message needs to be shared.

MJE confirmed that it was written in the ATP update.

JO agrees with **JR's** point regarding documents being hard to find and it is hard to navigate. If there was one document and you had hyperlinks off that which took you to the required form it would be easier.

MJE commented that it seems an overview screen would be popular.

CL (from chat): agree a simple directory useful to avoid wormholes.

LH commented that when a client signs up to a scheme they ask what they need to do and we have come up with our own reference sheet showing actions. It would be helpful if this came as part of the agreement and would help in terms of implementing as a clear breakdown of what needs to happen when. Perhaps having a hyperlink to each option to make it easier to navigate so that you don't have to search through the whole document each time. Points that would be helpful are milestones, actions and responsibilities, reporting points and it would be good to create this as part of the agreement. Also, there is the work programme sheet in the woodland management plan that nobody uses and doesn't seem to get it quite right.

PO commented that it is one of the pieces of work that is being looked at in terms of how we make the management plans link into the Higher Tier applications better. Lots of existing plans not just new plans so looking at how we can make it easier.

GG asked what is the management of different iterations of advice. Guidance that is produced at different times that has changed is all available and causes confusion.

MJE confirmed that we do have different iterations of different bits of advice depending on when your agreement was started and aware that this causes confusion. This will be looked at to see if this can be streamlined.

CS - User Research

ES, VB, IT & CB presented feedback session and responses captured by Defra.

AOB

NE commented that the focus of the agenda needs to be more balanced in the topics that are looked at. Also need to utilise other groups and have subgroups to look at subjects in more detail and then feedback as a summary to the wider group.

SJ agreed about the balance of topics on the agenda.

JO commented that the idea of subgroups is good in theory but aware that it takes a lot of planning and is often difficult to find a date.

POr commented that it would be good to reduce the amount of items on the agenda and give the opportunity for more discussion.

JR agreed that need to use the pool of expertise for more collaboration and co-design. This will result in a better end product.

CL agreed and commented that in terms of the working groups it may be beneficial to bring in those outside the DAG that could provide input.

JW advised that the next face-to-face that is currently due to take place on 3rd October is likely to move back a week to 26th September but details would follow.

Meeting ended 15:10