

Ref: FCDAG 07/2024

DAG Minutes: 18/07/2024**Location:** Webinar/teleconference**Chair:** Joe Watts**Secretary:** Sarah Lawson**Attendees****DAG Members:**Graham Garratt (ICF) **GG**Poppy Sherborne (NFU) **PS**Clive Thomas (Soil Association) **CT**Brian Fraser (HTA) **BF**Jackie Dunne (Confor) **JD**Paul Orsi (Sylva) **PO**Lisa Manning (W&C LINK) **LM**Chris Keeler (Small Woods) **CK**Claire Douglas (RPA) **CD**Adrian Jowitt (Natural England) **AJ**John Bruce (Confor) **JB**Luke Hemmings (NPFG) **LH**Ian Froggatt (Woodland Trust) **IF**John Blessington (Local Gov) **JB****FC/Defra/Natural England:**Joe Watts (FC) **JW**Sarah Lawson (FC) **SL**Stephanie Rhodes (FC) **SR**David Waines (FC) **DW**Penny Oliver (FC) **POI**Tom Burgoyne (Defra) **TB**Clare Emerson (Defra) **CE**

Ordel Gillson (FC)(observer)

Samantha Broadmeadow (FC)(observer)

Emma How (NE) **EH**Stuart Otway (NE) **SO**Ellie Littlejohn (FC) **EL**George Johnston (Defra) **GJ**Niamah Bashir (Defra) **NB**Leighton Mitchell (Defra) **LMi**Rebecca Waite (Defra) **RW****Apologies:**

Cheryl Lundberg (RFS)

Nick Phillips (Woodland Trust)

David Lewis (RICS)

Neville Elstone (ICF)

Graham Clark (CLA)

Simon James (Small Woods)

James Russell (Community Forests)

Julian Ohlsen (SW AFG)

Andrew Weatherall (RSPB)

DAG Minutes

Welcome

JW opened the session and welcomed all.

State of the Nation

JW commented on the election and advised that we are engaging with ministers but portfolios are yet to be confirmed. In terms of CS Higher Tier this is being reviewed and plans for CS Higher Tier and approach to ELMS will be confirmed as soon as possible. Also advised that the Forestry and Arboriculture Fund will be opening for applications in the coming weeks. Also a promotional campaign for Woods and Carbon has been started so hopefully you will see this over the next few weeks. We are also dropping the requirement for the accountant certificates for EWCO applications under £500,000.

SR wanted to flag the recent official statistics for woodland creation. It's not quite on the trajectory to meet the net zero targets but we are heading in the right direction and this is welcome news. It is a collective effort and thanks to all.

IF raised the restoration figures which were disappointing again and asked if there is anything to say on this.

SR responded that everything to do with management and improvement remains the poor relative at this time. We understand some of the levers that need to be applied going forward and we recognise there is much more to be done. We rely on you to help convey these messages to the new government.

Woodland Management & Impacts on Protected Species

EH (Project Manager, Natural England) presented slides.

JW asked for clarity around devolved administrations and asked what the scope is of this and whether it is mainly learning from other initiatives that have happened outside England. Also queried about the point regarding not many licences and suppose two conclusions can be drawn – either everyone is following the guidance and don't need a licence or is it that people aren't asking for licences when they do need them.

SO advised that in terms of engagement of the devolved administrations there have been initial discussions with NRW and NatureScot about their approaches and they have been sharing research and proposed reforms to guidance and licencing. We will continue to explore the evidence base and the legal reasons that they have pursued and the routes they have been taking and we can share some of that insight in due course.

LH asked where this will be shared and also queried if there is a list anywhere of which species are being looked at or is it a broad range?

EH responded that they would like to share the outcomes of the review with this group. So we will look to bring together the review of the guidance, review of the impacts and the survey results and report back. Also advised that in terms of the species the current focus is on EPS and keeping the scope fairly narrow on species we are most concerned about initially.

SO confirmed that dormice and certain species of bat have come out as ones that woodland management has potentially the greatest positive and negative impacts on out of the protected species.

SR commented it's great to see the joint working between them and the FC Policy and Advice Team. If need any help with who to contact please reach out to this forum as can offer assistance collectively. Interesting to explore the individual protected species under the current regulation we have but would be good to look at the protection of habitats and ecosystems and take the opportunity to ask the bigger questions.

GG commented that as a practitioner, previous experience of trying to apply for licences some time ago was incredibly difficult and would almost skew forestry work to ensure working within best practice rather than go down a licencing route. Also commented that it would be interesting to know, following **SR's** comments, if habitats are suffering because people are restricted by specific species protection or concerns about the difficulty of getting a licence. Would be good to know if licensing is still something that would be considered in exceptional circumstances or how much is it part of the normal approach to woodland management.

EH commented that it is valuable to have raised the issue about the application process and that the complexity may make people modify their behaviour. At the moment applying for an individual licence is quite an intensive process and we could look at making this more streamlined and clearer when a licence is required, ensuring the support and advice is there when you do. So, we will definitely be reviewing the licencing process.

JB asked if the survey been user tested to make sure it will get a broad range of responses as there may be some fears that this will try and make things more bureaucratic and challenging to manage our woodlands.

EH commented that they are going to contact someone from Confor to do cognitive testing and check that the language is correct and that we are asking the right questions.

PO commented that a few years ago the Woodland Wildlife Toolkit was developed and currently we are looking at a review as some of the guidance is a little out of date. It seems like a good opportunity to link up with the work you are doing when updating the Woodland Wildlife toolkit which looks at declining woodland species including EPS.

SO commented that the Woodland Wildlife toolkit should be covered within our guidance review but will need to double check this and check what the opportunities are. Queried how widely it is used across the industry.

PO responded that it used fairly widely and is promoted by government on gov.uk. Current coverage is Great Britain but as part of the review looking at whether it could be UK wide. Agreed to pick up with SO offline to discuss further.

EL raised comments from David Lewis who was unable to attend. Commented it would be helpful to have greater guidance on what is expected/ considered good practice for the EPS checks- eg the extent of desk based and site inspections for species such as bats, dormice and the competency/ level of the qualifications (if any).

EH asked for feedback to be passed on so that this could be shared with the working group.

LH asked if red squirrels are within scope as not heard them mentioned.

SO confirmed that red squirrels are within scope as are all EPS but as mentioned the current focus is dormice and bat species.

IF commented that in terms of the Woodland Wildlife toolkit it is more user friendly than the NBN Gateway so most landowners prefer to use it over that or use them together as they're not exactly the same datasets. Also asked for clarification on the support mentioned for licencing and asked if this is within the scope of this project. Currently if you apply for a licence you are treated like you are going to cause damage and gives the wrong message.

SO confirmed that a fundamental driver for the project is to understand what blockers for licencing might be if licencing is required and to come up with streamlined, strategic approaches.

Update on Ips Management

GJ (Tree Health Policy Advisor, Defra) presented slides.

GG asked whether this has been modelled how it is going to play out over time, both in terms of the natural distribution of the beetle and how circumstances might alter with climate change. Do you see this being geographically confined or do you think it is likely to play out over a larger area?

GJ advised that in terms of modelling out across Britain they is a large research project going on that models the effects of proactive removal and the shift of Ips. Currently most of our evidence based around incursion risk is showing strong risk areas are in the southeast and up the eastern coast. At the moment we are still trying to eradicate the pest and prevent the spread.

NB advised we have maps based on wind plume and have factored in climate modelling within the existing project but we are looking to expand that now and do some further work. We are confident that with the current demarcated area we are hitting the high-risk areas. The expansion of the project would look at that area in more detail and draw out higher risk areas. We are confident that with the geographical area that we have covered and if we can move forwards with the proactive removal then this further reduces the risk.

SR commented that the presentation referred to EWCO but going forward this should be for all woodland creation grants. Also queried why it is suddenly focused on what is being funded rather than what is approved from a regulatory perspective.

NB responded that we would like to see it rolled out more widely and not just confined to EWCO and need to pick up regarding how we get these changes implemented. We wanted the initial feedback on the change and the next step is to look at how we implement that change and look at the regulatory perspective.

PO commented that there may be quite a lot of spruce planting in demarcated areas in terms of Christmas trees. Asked if there has been any thoughts on what will be done regarding this as they won't be grant funded.

NB responded that with the wider policy work that is being carried out we are looking at options including regulatory options and have had conversations with Forestry Commission colleagues regarding Christmas tree growers and the exemptions that could be put in place where we feel that the risk is being effectively managed. It needs to be looked at on a case-by-case basis but there are some instances where the trees are not getting to a height where we are concerned and where the trees are being well managed

and are in good condition which reduces the risk from our perspective. We are having these conversations and looking at where exemptions would be appropriate.

LH (from chat): how much info is there on the possible suitability of alternative productive species in the DMA? Is anyone keeping track of data on what species cleared spruce areas are being replaced with?

NB responded (from chat): yes, we have information from Woodland Officers working on the ground on outbreak sites for this and we also drafted up some guidance that we could adapt around alternatives, recognising that suitability of different species is very much case by case. We can try to report back on this further if helpful.

Update on FLOv2

DW (Development Manager, Forestry Commission) presented slides.

JD asked what information has been gathered to decide what changes you want to make.

DW responded that there is a new user researcher working on the project and doing fourth iteration of development. Had two other user researchers working on this project who have taken forward engagement with external and internal users of the service to look at user needs relating to the service. The service we have currently is a combination of requirements set out for the business to be able to operate effectively but also balancing that with user needs. We summarized from the last round of user research that was done in 2023, 47 user needs that have interpreted into requirements to help us build this service.

JD queried if the list was available as having used the system and experienced issues with it, it would be useful to know if similar issues have already been raised. It seems unclear what the changes and developments might be.

DW advised that there are slides in the appendix which outline some of the changes and improvements. The fourth development iteration works hand in hand with this private beta test phase and there is continued user research so there are still opportunities to raise user needs that are must haves. We will need to triage these to decide which are essential in the first version of the minimum viable product that goes into a live launch and which go into a backlog for items for further change. Keen to hear about experiences and discuss changes.

ACTION: DW - Offered to pick up conversation with **JD** offline.

IF asked what the deadline is for registering interest in being part of the pilot.

DW responded roughly end of August but there is no hard deadline. We are keen to get people to help further. Thank you to those who have already shown an interest and that we are already in contact with but keen to hear from anyone else who would like to input.

Defra Customer Enabling Programme

TB (Customer Improvement & Innovation Lead, Defra) and **CE** (Customer Improvement Specialist, Defra) presented slides.

SR commented to add context joint Defra and FC commission to look at EWCO and Trees for Climate as we get ready for next spending review how we make the best of both worlds. We want to look at feedback around three main differences, which are difference in levels of support provided to applicants under the two different schemes, different levels of payment and different levels of due diligence. We need to be able to explain why there are differences and would like feedback on your experiences to assist with this.

LH advised that happy to give feedback but in the past has received links that if missed initially then the link does often expire and may be worth looking at other ways of gathering feedback.

CE responded that questionnaire links come from **ICF** consulting and we are not doing those sort of questionnaires and would welcome receiving feedback in any form that is convenient. Provided contact details so that people can reach out with any feedback: clare.emerson@defra.gov.uk

JW commented that would welcome a return to the group when you have your findings from this. If there are people that have engaged with both EWCO and Community Forest, it would be of great value to get their feedback on both processes.

AOB

Survey Feedback

SR commented that as part of wider thinking within FS of how we deliver even better we are aware and it has been raised in your feedback that we need to take a more systematic and consistent approach to building end users input into our work. We will work with our Business Change team to look at how we do that better and bring this back to you.

ACTION: Placeholder for bringing this back to FCDAG.

JD raised concerns over lack of information regarding Woodland Management Plans and the FC expectations of how this will work with CS Higher Tier. Feels not getting feedback or an opportunity to discuss.

LH commented that had a request from a Woodland Officer to create the woodland management plan to enable them to add CS options later, however we don't know what these are so unclear how we can make sure that the plan is covering the right bases. Also received a Technical Annex which hadn't previously been aware of. There was a section on trees and woodland which does have some payment rates but there also seems to be things missing that had previously been discussed so little unclear.

JW commented that this was the document that was published in January and this gives some indication of new payment rates and new options.

JD commented that we had a discussion around woodland management plans last year and we have not had any feedback since then and the feedback we give gets pushed to one side and feeling very frustrated.

SR responded that need to have a discussion with **JW** to look at this. Also commented that we have new ministers and although we don't have a forestry minister named yet we know what is at the top of our list and our immediate needs. It is early days but our new Secretary of State is genuinely interested in listening to stakeholders and think you have an opportunity to raise urgent needs.

JD confirmed it would be good to discuss further as feel there shouldn't be any reason to have to wait for feedback and discussions on woodland management planning.

JW commented that difficulty is the woodland management planning is closely linked with CS offer.

JD commented that this is a key thing being changed that hasn't been properly discussed with the group. In the past a management plan was a plan of intention. The CS Higher Tier is a commitment and an agreement. Feel not being talked to about what you are trying to achieve.

LH asked a practical question as essentially the timeline for information keeps shifting and looks increasingly like there may be a gap between current agreements finishing and being able to get new ones. We've planned to do a lot of these applications during the summer and then winter is focused on planting, so there are concerns that we will end up doing these applications in the winter when we are already busy or not get them in this year at

all which will have subsequent impacts. It would be good to have any information on timescales or if there is any talk about bridging the gap between schemes.

JW responded that unable to give news or indication of timing but we are feeding back the issues that this delay is causing the industry in terms of cash flow and continuity of agreements as well as workloads and planning. So we are making those points but unfortunately we can't give further information.

SR commented that we can't control what's being decided but certainty is becoming really important. What we could do is agree that if there is not a level of clarity by a certain date this means we are likely to miss a year's activity. Working with new ministerial teams allows us to take a bit more ownership and make the urgency clear to them.

IF highlighted perverse nature of writing a management plan to please a grant rather than writing it as the best thing in that wood for nature recovery and to achieve the management objectives. This is a failing of that grant system if you have to change your management plan in order to lever the money to enable it to happen. If it was working it would be able to fund the plan that needed to happen within that wood. It would be great to unpick this and spend some time gathering that feedback. As this political pressure is happening we will certainly be using those restoration figures and highlighting that this isn't good enough. Nature recovery isn't going to happen if we don't look after these vitally important habitats that we already have. It would be good if we have the solutions ready and would welcome time to discuss this further.

JD commented that woodland management plans go on regardless of the changes and the funding. As commented these plans should be about what you are looking at and what you want to achieve. If it becomes about being linked in with CS Higher Tier it's not going to work. There is an issue anyway when they run out halfway through a Higher Tier scheme and believe you need to look at rollovers in woodland management planning.

JW acknowledged the comments regarding rollovers. The woodland management plans and the woodland agreements are slightly different. Woodland agreements need a bit more housekeeping or refresh but think there is need for wider discussion on this.

GG commented regarding difference between WD2 agreements and the Agri environmental schemes and there might be an element of one off work in the WD2 but a lot of it is annual repeat work and if offered a slightly less value for money agreement over 6 years this should be something to consider to help the industry.

JW responded that these comments were noted and when we are in a position to, there will be a broader discussion on this.

JW reminded the group that the next meeting would be face-to-face meeting on 26th September in Birmingham.

Meeting ended 12:35