

Ref: FCDAG 03/2025

DAG Minutes: 13/03/2025**Location:** The Priory Rooms/ teleconference**Chair:** Joe Watts**Secretary:** Sarah Lawson**Attendees****DAG Members:**Poppy Sherborne (NFU) **PS**Luke Hemmings (NPFG) **LH**Adrian Jowitt (Natural England) **AJ**Julian Burchby (Confor) **JB**Neville Elstone (ICF) **NE**Paul Orsi (Sylva) **PO**Greg Vickers (RFS) **GV**

Online: Clive Thomas (Soil Association) **CT**, Graham Garratt (ICF) **GG**, Claire Douglas (RPA) **CD**, Ian Froggatt (Woodland Trust) **IF**, Cameron Hughes (CLA) **CH**

FC/Defra:Joe Watts (FC) **JW**Sarah Lawson (FC) **SL**Penny Oliver (FC) **POI**Chris Tomlin (FC) **CTo**Clare Emerson (Defra) **CE**Alec Rhodes (FC) **AR**William Bailey (FC) **WB**Katherine Flynn (Defra) **KF**

Graham Story (Defra) (observer)

Online: Sara Spillett (Defra) **SS**, Richard Hofman (FC) **RH**, Rob Arden (Defra) (observer), Emma Spencer (Capgemini) **ES**, Iain Turnbull (RPA) **IT**, Tom Burgoyne (Defra) **TB**, Louise Alexander (FC) **LA**

Apologies:

John Bruce (Confor)

John Blessington (Local Gov)

James Russell (Community Forests)

Brian Fraser (HTA)

Simon James (Small Woods)

Graham Clark (CLA)

David Lewis (RICS)

Jackie Dunne (Confor)

DAG Minutes

Welcome

JW opened the session and welcomed all.

'State of the Nation'

- Temporary closure of SFI which will be reviewed with an intention to open a new and improved SFI after the spending review.
- Number of Fixed Term Appointments not being extended which means either people will be leaving the Forestry Commission or returning back to their substantive posts often at a lower grade, number of people effected around 45 with about 20 people leaving the FC.
- Planting season for EWCO going well and seeing agreements are going out and claims coming in.
- Higher Tier to open in the summer and we are very active on our pre application work and refining that process
- Trees to Timber campaign opened up and the government has renewed its commitment to the timber and construction road map and the Professional Forester Apprenticeship programme is currently open.
- JW confirmed that he would be retiring and leaving the Forestry Commission at the beginning of July.

PO asked in terms of those with FTAs not being extended, if there was any thematic or geographical areas where this was falling and whether particular roles were being removed.

JW confirmed that it was spread across the Forestry Commission and no particular roles were disappearing.

LH raised issues that applicants were having with accessing woodland capital grants mainly fencing.

POI responded that standalone capital will open in the summer. Higher Tier capital is open and would go through the same way as Protection and Infrastructure. CS tree health still open so would be good to understand issues further and can take up with RPA.

NE asked in terms of broad strategy, food security and biodiversity mentioned but others were not mentioned and is this a broad reflection of strategic development. Also is there a planned successor of Nature for Climate Fund.

JW responded that need to refer to the press release and Secretary of State speech at NFU conference. Food production, Farm businesses and Nature Recovery are the three main themes.

JB asked when the new Felling Licence online update when is it likely to be released?

JW advised that it is likely to be in the summer.

GG commented that he was surprised at the withdrawal of SFI and wonder where that leaves rural businesses that rely on that sort of funding stream. Also asked what the relationship is between the spending review and relaunch of Higher Tier and whether the relaunch date is independent of the spending review. There has been a long wait for this and looking for reassurance that this isn't going to change.

JW advised that in terms of SFI this is being paused and will be reopened and so it hasn't gone and the structure should remain the same. In terms of Higher Tier, nothing announced should impact this. What the spending review may mean in terms of later years of Higher Tier is unknown but plans are continuing as anticipated.

CT requested for message to be passed on regarding the significance the SFI announcement has for certain farming enterprises. The budget has been spent on larger farms and those smaller farmers who have partially completed applications have now lost out. Aware that it is a temporary pause but it leaves some farmers in a very difficult position. The handling of it has been appalling and especially as there is no dispensation for partially developed applications in the system.

PS echoed **CT**'s comments but also to consider not only the impact on businesses but also their trust in the government and funding. We don't know what the future offer may look like but those farmers may not be in a business position to take on additional risks and might change their business model to ensure they can survive. Also important to consider learnings from this about how it has been managed and communicated so this is not repeated in other schemes if a cap or limit is reached.

CH commented that it has been a disastrous announcement for members. As far as environmental targets and business implications not really sure where it leaves us.

IF commented on the ripple effect of the announcement for wider non-government subsidised businesses that are going to feel the effect. Concern for nurseries particularly with agroforestry and fruit trees as they are expensive to produce. They won't have the confidence and will start importing them which is not a great outcome.

JW responded that the comments and thoughts were noted and would be fed back.

Update on Tree Protection guidance, Managing Ancient and Native woodland practice guide update and WCA in CS

CTo (Policy Adviser – Natural Environment, FC) presented the slides

Tree Protection Project

PS commented that some guidance will be really useful because aware of beaver impacts seen by some members. Does it align with the requirements in the schemes as previously raised that technically you should fence out the beavers from the trees but then you are stopping them having access to the trees so the scheme rules don't align with the protection of beavers. If you lose a lot of trees as a result would that impact on the actual agreement so asking if how the beavers now fit with the schemes is that being thought of.

CTo confirmed that it is being considered although no decisions have been made.

JW asked if there are issues with fencing them out, can you relocate the problem beavers or do you require a licence for this.

AJ commented that there is a hierarchy of actions that can be taken. It seems to be not so much the problem but fear of not being able to do something about a problem that is a blocker.

CTo commented that as experienced in Scotland, you can live with beaver within established woodland effectively. The issue is you have got to be on top of your deer control as there is research that demonstrates that trees are more palatable to deer, if coppiced by beaver. From the Scottish approach there is a definite hierarchy and ways to deal with the beaver, whether it is putting in individual tree protection or adding more palatable species within the mix but again it is dependent on the deer control and if this isn't in place it can cause future establishment issues. It is something that is being looked at.

LH asked if as well as the capital funding for beaver pens for releasing beavers, is there potential funding for protection or is it just guidance.

CTo responded that you can get fencing such as spiral guards around trees. It depends on the scale and type of fencing. There is a range of options but something that we need to discuss internally is the grant response depending on the issues. This is a little way off but tree protection gives a starting point.

PO commented from a habitat point of view, do we not want them to damage trees and are we getting overly worried about this?

AJ responded that it may be an issue where someone has a full on commercial woodland but in most cases against the river it would be a more naturalistic habitat.

GV commented that it is all very well saying that we are happy for them to damage trees but if you are a private landowner and if species are being reintroduced that will cause damage who is going to pay? That is for the forestry industry to lobby the government. We have enough problems with grey squirrel and deer and don't really need more problems.

PS raised an example with a member who had riparian buffer planted and beaver have taken out some of those young trees. They now need to replant at their own cost and there are challenges where the beavers are not within the wider objectives of that land management and how are they going to be managed and how does that align with the scheme requirements.

IF asked if the leaflets will have links to which parts of which schemes have funding for various protection and management options or are they more just guidance.

CTo advised not on the leaflets but on GOV.UK which is easier for us to keep on top of and update as needed.

MANW

GG commented that previously when looking at native and ancient woodlands often pushed to recreate a single native woodland model and you can end up losing biodiversity or social value in woodland. When deciding what you should do with ancient woodland you need to look at what it has now and what its value is to the owner and society. There needs to be flexibility to the approach and it would be nice to know that there is a common view that Forestry Commission and Natural England are offering so that we wouldn't be pulled in different directions. Also asked if guidance is going to look at the creation of new wood pasture in native woodlands.

CTo responded that NE are on the board and working with them to have a uniform approach to make this work. Also advised that the focus is on existing woodland rather than woodland creation.

GG clarified that in terms of new wood pasture was referring to re-purposing established woodlands to allow better integration in the landscape.

CT commented that they have been using the Woodland Condition Assessment idea and process which has been adapted and developed the farm treescape functional assessment for the Whole Farm Tree Plan Project and offered to share learnings. In terms of distinction between wood pasture and parkland, feel it depends on the management strategy in terms of the farming enterprise and there may merit in keeping them together and think about it from more of a functional perspective.

CTo clarified that wood pasture and parkland will be kept together as a single unit.

LH commented that using as an active decision-making tool would be welcome. It would be useful to look at the forest development types and consider having a similar approach with native woodland and using NVC types. It appeals as there are recommendations and a loose framework that could be adapted to different situations.

CTo agreed that the active management tool is a great idea and will look into that as part of the project development and whether we can have some descriptions linked to NVC types. He discussed that we need to consider climate change and look at the flexibility within the guidance and try different risk-based approaches based on the woodland type and relevant importance. So we are likely to be happy to take more risks and look at different species within the new woodlands, but have a precautionary approach when considering irreplaceable habitats.

PO agreed that it is important not to be too prescriptive and particularly because of the uncertainty of how things are going to react to climate change. Also just a reminder regarding the Forest and Climate Change Partnership that is an existing group that might be useful to bring into discussions and workshops.

NE commented that he did some work with Natural England on developing habitat guidance for woodland types and would be useful if this could be shared. There was information in there about the RAD approach around climate and it's a really useful model.

AJ commented that it is clear that there are lots of bits of work going on around these topics and we need to make sure that these are all pulled together and come up with an overarching view rather than parallel pieces of work going on.

CTo agreed that there are a range of groups that need to be engaged within this and if anyone knows of other groups then we will endeavour to link up with them for the workshops in the summer.

IF commented that the topic of rainforests is a rising topic. Although it is niche there are also other different woodland types that are going to have different problems and need to ensure this is considered.

CTo responded that rainforests is covered a bit in the current guidance and we can ensure there is a focus on that.

LH asked in terms of strategic priorities whether timber security will also come into this, particularly where we can balance more than one objective.

CTo responded that in terms of timber security and balancing objectives this will be looked at when looking at management objectives for the site and thinking about making it work for the owner, acknowledging that it is different for public estates and private landowners.

WCA

GG commented that under WS1 and WS3 as they were there was quite an exacting monitoring requirement embedded in those payments, so asking for some rationality to what is being monitored and that we aren't having to duplicate work. Also observed that this could be more work for forestry technicians and it would be good to see that resourced within the sector.

GV commented that for it to be effective it would need to be all woods to be able to gather sensible data. Also raised the Defra Biodiversity Metric which is a system which does a similar thing but is comparable with farmland and other habitats and produces a score which would show the value of woodland against other habitats, so querying if we need to re-invent the wheel?

CTo doesn't duplicate work of biodiversity metric. The WCA is based on the Woodland Ecological Condition (WEC) assessment which is the national assessment and the 15 indicators of the WEC go through the WCA. There is a strong rationale why we are using that and the app is very straightforward and quick to use. In terms of timing, cost and continuity, the suggestion is to combine the WCA with your management planning. The woodland walk, a part of the WCA, is the opportunity to pick up any things you may have missed during your plot surveys, like veteran trees or invasive species. The app combines the woodland walk with the plot surveys. There is a minimum number of plots to be undertaken, however if a holding was a really diverse the woodland officer may ask for more plots to be undertaken.

LH echoed **GG's** comments regarding the concern around the volume of data collection and it would be good if that could be built into that assessment phase. It would be more appealing to people and help with costs if you are doing it at the same time as the

management plan. Raised that the funding looks quite tricky and it would be interesting to know how you have arrived at those funding rates and whether they would be subject to be revised in future. The Woodland Management Planning funding rates haven't been revised much over the last 20 years and it creates issues for those woodlands in the middle range where funding doesn't really cover the cost. This could be a way of improving the balance and we can do this at the same time. Looking at the rates would be interesting.

CTo responded that noted comments regarding the paperwork and equipment. If WCA is combined with the management planning process we feel payment rates are reasonable.

POI responded in terms of the funding rates this was based on how long it has been taking to do them from the pilot.

PO wanted to clarify when you can do it as there seems to be confusion. If you are saying you could do it when writing your management plan you wouldn't have started your Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier contract by that point so can you count that as year one? If so, that would appeal to people.

CTo clarified that you could. We are anticipating that a WCA will last five years. You can put it in as a capital bid. We recognise that it will take a while to do your management plan and get it through the process, so five years should give enough time to get everything processed and go live. Obviously, there are caveats to that, if something major happens in the woodland/holding after completing a WCA, you might need to repeat your WCA.

HT Online Portal Demo

ES (Capgemini) and **IT** (RPA) presented a demo of the portal.

LH queried that when you went over the rotational options there was the ability to select all parcels but that wasn't there for the previous two option types.

IT confirmed that this is due to the way the system architecture has been designed. Every time you select a land parcel we are running a series of rules and if we had to do it against all land parcels that could cause performance issues. For the rotational screen we don't have to run any rules. That screen will actually not be shown and is a legacy screen as all actions have been made static and there is a different approach for rotationals.

GV asked if there is an option to select multiple parcels as opposed to all parcels. Also is there an option to split parcels. Also asked if you can put capital items across more than one parcel.

IT responded that applicants are asked to make sure that their land details are up to date before they start. The system will gather all the land parcels linked to their SBI when they start an application and if there are any changes within mapping data it doesn't get reflected in that list which has been locked down.

PO clarified that instead of looking at splitting parcels to create new ones the query relates to doing things within the land parcel that doesn't affect all of it.

IT responded that you don't have to enter all of the land parcel into the agreement so you would only enter the area that is relevant. If a capital item straddles a number of land parcels you would have to enter each one and measure that in each one.

JB asked if there is a requirement to map specific locations of operations linear or features as we do at the moment.

IT responded that none of the features, capital items, or actions are geospatially mapped within the system.

POI commented we will expect maps to be submitted that will go on CRM.

IT advised that we will be generating an application map that will list all the parcels that are linked to the application. The location of the capital items and potential actions will need to be marked up on those maps that are submitted and available on CRM.

GG commented if you have an option that applies to more than one land parcel and you have to enter every single land parcel individually that is going to waste a lot of time and there must be a way of grouping things together.

IT noted comment and advised that this would be captured as a requirement. No guarantee that it will be delivered on day one.

GG commented that have situations where clients have land in different landscapes on the same SBI and they have been running different woodland management plans out of sync with each other. You advised that an application wouldn't be able to progress if the woodland management plan wasn't up to date but if the application is for a holding in one county which has a viable management plan but the land in a different county doesn't so how do you make the distinction. Also confused about the HEFER section as

the language suggests that the applicant has an action but this wouldn't be the case and also the same with SSSIs as this isn't something that can be controlled by the applicant.

IT responded regarding the HEFER question that it is placeholder text at the moment and reflective for SFI schemes. Content is being reviewed and will be updated to be more reflective of the Higher Tier journey. Currently, when the customer is invited to join as part of the pre-application journey then Historic England will pick that up and request a HEFER on behalf of the customer and so by the time the customer gets to this screen they will already have their HEFER for Higher Tier.

GG asked if the supplements that are going to be available for woodland purposes that are conditional on having the right option. Will there be a released tier of options or if an option is selected which is not viable will this be thrown up as an error.

IT responded that if you tried to select a supplement and there is a requirement for a base option to be in place the system will display an error message and we can tailor that message to be as descriptive as needed.

GG asked, as only woodland options outlined in my woodland management plan should be applied for, will the system be aligned to recognise this and if a submission assessment required.

IT advised that the system wouldn't be able to recognise this but we are looking at how the pre-application journey can be digitised to elicit some of that information but the requirements are still to be captured and fully understood.

POI confirmed that we haven't got to the part in the journey where you submit for advice. When it comes to that part, it would come to us to do those checks against the pre-application and the management plan.

GG asked what the term ALB advisor refers to and also if want to challenge a reject on the system how do we do that.

IT responded that the term 'reject' was being looked at as may not reflect all scenarios. If there is any concern he customer would need to speak to the Forestry Commission directly and for that to be managed off the system. There is no facility for a messaging platform as this is an additional complexity. Also advised ALB is Arms Length Body and is a generic term that covers not just Forestry Commission but also Natural England, Historic England and possibly Environment Agency.

GG commented that it needs to be not just speaking to a Woodland Officer as feel it needs to be challenged within time constraints within the system or there is a risk of it disappearing.

IT acknowledged this and think there is something there to be managed by business process that can be looked at to ensure that there is the correct route for customers to query a decision. It is not just the actions that the advisor or woodland officer can comment against, they can also comment against the application as a whole. We would expect if something has been rejected then there needs to be good reason for this.

IF asked if in terms of the validation at the end when you are about to submit your application can you sum up how many parcels you have applied certain things to so that you can identify if you have missed anything.

IT confirmed that in check your answers it will total up the number of actions that have been applied for but that will be across the application as a whole, not on certain land parcels. It also gives a financial value as well.

PS asked about the ALB interaction and how that works. Currently you have the invitation stage so the checks are done initially and is there any work before those checks are done. Also queried if it would be the same person who is reviewing the application that checked the pre-application or someone different.

POI advised that at the moment the pre-application process is totally off system. It is invite only and when we complete that process it is a completed form which is loaded on to CRM. When we invite people to apply the Woodland Officer will be checking the application against what was discussed in pre-application as well as the management plan and they will be reviewing on that basis. At some point pre-app will go on the system and some of those checks will then be run earlier. In terms of the person doing the checks, although staff will change over time, ideally it would be the same person that has done the pre-application that would complete the review. There is also a peer approval stage as well so that someone else will be checking it at the end.

PS also asked about if there was more than one ALB involved, is there a behind the scenes agreement. Thinking as the landowner, who they would challenge something with.

POI advised that if there is a mixed application then all parties need to agree that they are happy with it.

IT advised that a lot is tracked on a separate system where data can be exported to help us manage progress though pre-application, application, advice and submission

stages. We can then link that all together and identify if there are multiple ALBs that need to be involved. In the past we have received very few mixed applications but in those cases we can identify and manage them accordingly. The ALB whose body has the most responsibility would potentially take responsibility for the coordination of the application.

GG asked about mixed applications and it seems cleaner to keep the woodland and agricultural interests separate but is there any advantage or disadvantage to combining them and whether it would help from a scoring point of view.

POI responded that historically there have been very few mixed applications and unless you are totally aligned and you have done pre-application at the same time, the chances are they will be separate. We are currently checking with Natural England if we are doing pre-application on the same ones but we are not having that overlap at the moment. There is no advantage and it depends on the estate and the set up and the way the landowner wants to do it. Also there is no scoring in Higher Tier at this point in time.

PO asked if capital options could be bundled into the same list as the annual options so that you are doing all selections when on one land parcel rather than have to do it twice.

IT responded that unfortunately this isn't possible for a couple of reasons. One is the potential list of options and actions could be quite vast on one screen and make what the screen much more complicated to display and create cognitive overload. Also we have a different set of system checks that are run against revenue actions and against capital items. Running the different set of rules for both together could cause some performance issues.

LH commented in terms of having different options within the same land parcel and the need to have land details updated at the outset, it would be good if we could go in and make those changes and know that they wouldn't be changed by the RPA between now and us submitting the application. Currently the issue we have is that we never know when the RPA will make changes without us realising. Could there be a pause on changes to mapping on parcels in SBIs which are in the system.

IT acknowledged these comments and advised that he would take this away to see whether this is something that we could introduce.

PS asked whether the new capital grant rules might impact the number of mixed applications as the wording suggests that you can only submit one application per SBI per year so if you wanted to do capital grants for woodland and your agricultural system you might submit a joint application.

POI responded that is for the stand alone offer and there won't be those limits for Higher Tier.

IF queried whether in terms of cross-referencing stuff whether there could be a visual option so when you have clicked on an option that would also light up on a map as having that visual reference rather than picking things from a list would be really helpful.

IT acknowledged that this was a good idea and would take that away to speak with the development team to see if it would be something that we could introduce. It may not happen straight away but we can have a look going forward.

JW asked if you put a lot of information into the system is there an opportunity to export that out of the system to be used elsewhere.

IT advised that there is an application summary document that is a summary of everything that has been applied for and it is currently being worked on in terms of what it will include, but this is as a document rather than a CSV file or Excel table.

LH commented that a CSV file would a useful feature so that we could have everything in one place.

NE commented one concern is that we are going to respond to demand rather than societal need and opportunity and think there is a potential for huge dead weight in this, in the applicants that come forward may be those that can afford to do the work and could be a risk for huge loss for society.

Woodland Creation Fast Track in EWCO

WB (Incentives Development Manager, FC) presented slides.

NE commented that EWCO time frames should be looked at more broadly; from when you apply to WCPG to when the tree goes in the ground, giving a more holistic position of where the blockers are. Also commented that people have queried whether EWCO is still open so simplistic messages are really important and that the low sensitivity land payment seems a perverse incentive. We are incentivising easy and deliverable rather than harder schemes and that will provide the ecosystem services which would make a difference to society.

JW responded regarding there may be some greater public benefits on trickier sites but also through behaviour change we can hopefully get more applications coming through on easier sites and we should be able to get more woodland planted, faster, for less money. If a big landowner makes the call to go down the easier route we can all benefit.

JB asked if there was an upper limit on the fast track.

WB responded that there isn't technically an upper limit. If all the compartments fall within the low sensitivity layer, there is no reason why they can't receive payment across the whole application. It would be good to look at how the processing time scales are affected by the overall size of the application and to see if there are any correlations between difficulties in meeting processing times and the larger applications.

SS commented what an enormous success this has been and well done to all that have made it happen.

LH commented there may still be a lack of understanding about the eligible areas. Looking at the layers can be quite confusing and queried whether other low sensitivity layers could be removed. Suggested that if there was a pre-application check that could be run before submission would be helpful. Also asked if the range of low risk layers still need to be there?

WB clarified that the primary layer for the Fast Track and low Sensitivity Land Payment is low sensitivity version 4. Variant 3 expands the low sensitivity area to include Grade 3a farmland. Those are the 2 key layers. 90% of the application area must lie within Version 4 and the remaining 10% must lie in variant 3.

AR commented that we are still using low risk for EIA and the regulations tie us to that.

PO queried that information is brought back to the Incentives team for a decision and wonder why the power isn't with the Area teams to accelerate decision making.

WB responded that originally the protocol was for the Operational Delivery Team to make the initial assessment and if they were unsure they could refer to the Area teams, however in some cases there was uncertainty from both and whilst we want people to feel confident in making decisions it felt more sensible that cases come through the same channel for consistency.

AJ commented regarding some of issues around unmapped bird areas and NE and FC ornithologists are now meeting to discuss which should help resolve this. Comments regarding buffer zones around SSSIs will be forwarded on to be looked at. Would be good to see how well this is working against the known unknowns such as the botanical heat map and looking into this should be part of the review.

JW asked if a EWCO offer in principle can be made when there is another grant agreement on land.

WB confirmed that if there is six months or less to run on the current grant agreement, we can offer EWCO in principle.

Update on EWCO and WCPG Work Planning

AR (Head of Incentives Development and Compliance, FC) and **CE** (Improving Customer Delivery Team, Defra) presented slides.

AR presented

GV commented that to get a large uptake of new planting is probably going to require something outside of FC control. The Forestry Commission's approach to woodland creation is a low-risk strategy and as a consequence you will get low results.

PO commented in terms of Green Finance and interesting that the Woodland Officers are asking for clarity. It is such a complex area and would be good to know who is working on this as it seems like a big piece to get absolutely right and it's stopping things moving.

AR responded that there is a lot of work happening within the FC and Defra to move that forward and that it is the complexity that is taking the time but we can look to provide a further update in due course.

CTo commented that they will be doing some BNG training with the regional teams in the summer as part of the woodland condition assessment and looking at how BNG fits into it and would be useful to catch up on that. Possible waders projects were mentioned and could we look at working together on that and any others where PAT could look to support.

AR responded that he will link up regarding the BNG information and talk about wader zoning. It is a case of how can we bring these things together into fewer products for people to interpret.

LH commented that we could provide further feedback on the uptake and there are probably some things that would affect the uptake more than you might think such as complexity of the process, how prescriptive requirements are, scale and importantly permanence. A more flexible position on woodland creation being a permanent land use change could unlock a lot of ground if people didn't feel like they were committing to something for eternity and could treat it as another crop. Also feel could help with the argument for the long-term woodland management side of productive forestry as it is not necessarily about giving money to commercial foresters, it is about encouraging

them away from the easy option of single species and simple management. If you want people to diversify, unless you are going to regulate, the best way is through incentives.

AR responded that the comments regarding permanency are noted.

CE presented

AJ suggested making speaking to a Woodland Officer a pre-requisite for applying should have a higher score: if you want good outcomes it is best to link them up with a person who will actually talk to them. This whole thing of an upfront conversation with someone could overcome so many problems that we see in schemes.

AR noted this feedback but shared a concern that if it was made mandatory that it could be off-putting but noted and guess it comes down to capacity to provide that service.

AJ responded that it may require a trial but suspect that overall it would save resource, there would be greater capacity needed upfront but that would probably be saved down the line.

NE echoed **AJ**'s comments and in terms of Community Forests, people chose to go through them because it is more supported.

JB agreed with the above and commented EWCO is complex and expensive. Also there is no guarantee of the funding. Not every site is straightforward but for those that are it should be easier.

AR commented that they are conscious of the comparison with Community Forests and perhaps investing in that support is a bit more deliverable for them but note that we need to look at that.

LH commented if there was an option where you could submit a pre-application form if you were unsure it would be useful. The FC could review and come back to the applicant and suggest any changes. This could take a lot of the risk out of the process for the applicant if there is the resource for this.

AR noted the comments about pre-application as something to consider.

LH commented that the complexity of the process, not just the application but getting the conversation going all takes time and by having some simple pre-application expression of interest it could get the ball rolling and prevent delays. The length of time that the process takes at the moment prevents people from even starting and it would be good to take some of the pressure off when people are at the stage when they are ready to deliver.

GV commented reduced bureaucracy, up-front payments and temporary land use are creating barriers to woodland creation. Those elements all increase risk for the government but to get the big wins there needs to be a bit more risk around those areas.

PO commented regarding the Net Promoter Score and the reason that Community Forests do well is because they have someone to take them through the process and there is value for money in that hand holding and de-risking the process.

LH commented that part of the simplicity of the process with Community Forests is that they are given more autonomy to make those calls and there is a kind of deregulated element to them particularly below a certain size threshold.

CTo commented regarding LNRS when they come live, the opportunity for woodland creation has been signed off by NE, FC, EA and the local authority and could we fast track those areas for woodland creation as they have gone through the process and everyone has agreed that they are happy with them.

AR acknowledged comments regarding LNRS and was hopeful that this could streamline the process if all parties sign-up to fully support woodland creation in areas identified through the LNRS. But was cautious that there are often still unknown constraints woodland creation is asked to check for, WCFT was an example; FC has tried to map as far as possible using national data sets where woodland creation should not be a problem, but there are still known unknowns that mean there is still a degree of triage and checking that needs to happen. This makes managing expectations and timescales difficult.

JW commented that there is that first call with a Woodland Officer and also the promotional engagement staff that can cover some of the less technical early engagement. In terms of the pre-application, in a way that is what the Woodland Creation Planning Grant is designed for but if that is not fulfilling that process then we need to look at this. Regarding LNRS and where that fits, we should look to expand the fast track and bring in what we can that can go through that route. We are constantly looking at how we can provide more information to do that first screening and if we can cover off some of the known unknowns that should take one more pressure away.

AR emphasised there is a lot we want to improve but there is only so much that we can achieve and the work plan will need to be realistic and be prioritised to manage this.

AOB

JW commented that the next meeting would be online on 24th April.

NE commented that as it would be the last face-to-face meeting with Joe as chair, he wanted to say thank you for all Joe has done for the group and the FC and good luck for the future.

Meeting ended 15:05