

Ref: FCDAG 01/2025

DAG Minutes: 30/01/2025**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**Paul Orsi (Silva) **PO**Simon James (Small Woods) **SJ**James Russell (Community Forests) **JR**David Lewis (RICS) **DL**Alistair Bowis (RPA) **AB**Laura Bower (W&C LINK) **LB**Adrian Jowitt (Natural England) **AJ**John Bruce (Confor) **JB**Luke Hemmings (NPFU) **LH**Brian Fraser (HTA) **BF**Neville Elstone (ICF) **NE**Greg Vickers (RFS) **GV****FC/Defra:**Joe Watts (FC) **JW**Sarah Lawson (FC) **SL**Penny Oliver (FC) **POI**Rhianne Harris (FC) **RH**Ewan Calcott (FC) **EC**David Waines (FC) **DW**Alec Rhodes (FC) **AR**Paul Davison (Defra) **PD****Apologies:**

Graham Clark (CLA)

Sara Spillett (Defra)

DAG Minutes

Welcome

JW opened the session and welcomed all including Greg Vickers who will be the new representative for RFS. Thanked Cheryl Lundberg for her input and contributions to the group over the years.

State of the Nation

JW commented in terms of the Nature for Climate fund and impacts on staff and advised that we are still working through implications of spending review and as such we are unable to say more at this time. Also mentioned the publication of information on CS Higher Tier which will be covered in this meeting. Currently waiting for news of impact of storm Eowyn but early indications are that the damage isn't as bad as feared. In terms of the planting season from the perspective of claims coming in would urge anyone with claims waiting to get them in as soon as possible.

NE asked about NCF and in terms of FC and Defra who decides the priorities.

JW responded that there is a dialogue. We need to check our priorities against ministerial priorities and that is ultimately where we take our steer from.

Earth Observation

EC (Principal Advisor – Woodland Regulations, FC) presented slides.

GG asked as there seems to be so much small-scale illegal felling if there is any data on why that is happening, whether it is sectors that are unaware of regulations or deliberate malicious acts. Also commented that there will be a lot of data and a desire to investigate this and interested to know how this will be balanced with available resources.

LH commented that there were a couple of sites visited who had provided feedback that the timing was unwelcome as it was in the middle of shooting season and also made at very short notice which seems unnecessary. Also commented that feedback after the inspections would be welcome.

EC apologised in terms of the timing of the visits intruding on shooting season however tied into timing of Forest Research and IFOS in terms of how to improve the algorithm and the mechanics of identifying those felled sites. Also commented that when doing

formal inspections would like to be more effective at providing feedback even when everything is OK and not just when remedial action is required.

JB agreed with **GG**'s point about the sheer amount of data and how you prioritise that. Also interested in how windblow fits in with this and how it could be used in this area.

EC responded there should be the ability to identify windblow as a type of change and address that as a subset of the felled area, but currently this is still being worked through and hasn't been tested yet.

DL commented that he feels much of the small-scale illegal felling is due to ignorance of the regulations and on the whole the cases seen at his reference committee relate to small amounts of timber being felled. This system will potentially throw up many more cases and will put a lot more pressure on resource. The threshold of 5 cubic metres is not much and wonder if it would be worth increasing that threshold.

EC responded that there will be more data than we can visit and cope with so has to be a triage process, which is why the reporting structures are so critical in terms of identifying what is known felling and what is illegal felling. It is also important to set those parameters around what is important to us from a policy or societal perspective in terms of what we prioritise. A lot of the very small cases may not be illegal, just unlicensed and that is part of the ongoing evaluation, but the triage process should mitigate that by us not visiting those sites. We want the focus to be the bigger, more environmentally impactful type felling and we want to try and move our focus to an evidence-based enforcement and compliance process.

EC commented that in terms of the five cubic metres alteration would require legislative change and we are a long way off being able to deliver any changes to the Forestry Act through the parliamentary process.

CT interested to know if the same data and machine learning techniques might be used elsewhere in Forest Research or within Forestry Commission to help with carbon assessments.

GV interested to know whether it can detect restocking because this would be a positive implication for resources. Also, in terms of the illegal felling it could act as a deterrent if launched through the press to inform people of the regulations and if they knew that any illegal felling could be detected this may encourage the submission of felling licences.

EC responded that there is a lot of science involved and the core satellite data, particularly the high-resolution data can be used across a number of different projects. The machine learning that is analysing the data is really fine-tuned to look for specific

types of change and for our woodland compliance job there may alignment with other projects but things like restocking are completely different and would require a different bit of machine learning and currently that's not necessarily getting the investment.

JW commented that in terms of it acting as a deterrent, agree that at the right time if we can deploy this would definitely be a benefit in the future but there is a lot of work to do before we get to that stage in terms of the triage process working through the sheer amount of information.

JR commented that we need to avoid loss of national canopy but it is also important to quantify that in terms of a loss of natural capital and the benefits that have been lost and the impact on society in economic terms is something we ought to be able to show with this dataset. Feel this would help advance our arguments in demonstrating the importance of woodlands.

EC responded that in terms of natural capital one of the things we want to be able to do is use the evidence of what is actually occurring, when within the calendar year, where it is occurring regionally to inform policy. It could help with things like wildlife licensing with particular species if we are able to provide the evidence to show the link between woodland management and the loss of a particular species or habitat. Hoping to feed into policy and other regulatory developments in an evidence-based way. Other natural capital elements may come out of that if the right questions are asked and carbon is potentially one - whether it would need some additional remote sensing work is bigger than this specific project.

GG commented further to **JR's** comments that it would be interesting to know how much is illegal harvesting of timber and to what degree it is degradation of woodland and to what degree is it deforestation. This will have implications in how carbon might be considered. Also to echo **LH's** comment and a plea to not normalise short notice inspections.

FLOv2 Update

DW (Development Manager, FC) presented slides.

LH commented that he had just done his testing session and it all looked pretty good. There were a few bits that have been fed back and that need further work but overall it seems pretty self-explanatory and looking forward to trying the real thing.

DW appreciated feedback and commented that the improvements for the internal users have been significant and hoping that the whole process will be improved not just the external user interface experience.

JW commented that the testing is really important and anyone else who wishes to sign up is welcome. It is valuable to get that external view before we go live so that we can get it as right as possible. Advised that further updates will be given as we get closer to release date.

DW commented that if anyone was working with colleagues who have never used the felling licence application service it would be great to hear from them and get insights from those coming at it completely fresh.

CS Higher Tier Update

POI (Head of ELM, FC) presented slides.

PO asked when the applications open in the summer will this mean that people no longer have to wait to be invited for pre-application advice.

POI responded that only people that have had their pre-application advice will be able to enter and once this has been completed they will be invited into the online system. In time, once the pre-application is on the system people can request pre-application through the system and then keep going through to application but we are not sure when this is going to happen and the timeline for this so at the moment it is a controlled rollout of invite only. You will only be able to apply in the summer if that pre-application stage has been completed.

PO asked regarding the species management supplement, if you have a deer management plan that has been approved as part of an already approved woodland management plan do you still have to go and do that again?

POI responded that if there has been a species plan approved in the past this would need to be checked against the template that's now required and it couldn't be funded. As a capital item it can be funded but if you have already written it and it meets the expected guidelines and template, it can be used but not funded.

GG queried who the pre-application invitations are being sent to, whether they are just being sent to owners or agents.

POI responded that the invites are going to whoever the lead person is on the Rural Payments system, but if you have any concerns that you think things aren't going to the right person please let us know. The Area teams have also gone through the lists so hopefully they should be going to the right people but please raise any concerns.

NE asked if the implications of not responding is spelt out strongly enough in the correspondence. Also asked if there is going to be a ring fence around woody ELM's interventions or is going to be just one bucket?

RH commented that the letter does make it clear that if you want to apply for Higher Tier that you need the pre-application advice. It also says if you are not interested in pre-application advice then we will not be contacting them at all in future. If it needs to be strengthened we can look to make tweaks as necessary.

POI also commented that there are follow ups being done if people haven't responded. Also responded that there is no ring-fenced woodland budget, it is just a Higher Tier budget.

DL asked will people be able to apply for the squirrel and deer supplement if they have already got the annual management grant. Also if they can, how would they get on the pre-application stage.

POI responded that if you have already got the WD2 agreement you can't add the species options on top of it. At the moment the advice is to come into a new agreement, there will be ten-year agreements covering all the actions for species and woodland management.

PS asked about the capacity for the advice and invites going out versus the demand and uptake. Conscious that future applicants may have to wait a long time before they could apply.

POI responded that we have given estimates of numbers that we think we can do at the moment, but it is very dependent on the online system actually opening when it should and functioning as it should. So there are a lot of dependencies and assumptions we're making around the numbers. It is going to take some time to get through the demand we are anticipating but this is based on approved management plans and not everyone with an approved plan comes into Higher Tier. When we get to know a bit more about response rates we may potentially be able to increase that number.

LH commented that in terms of the species management plan the rates look a little lower than what was previously indicated and think there is maybe a bit of uncertainty about how much detail is going to be needed. Previously there has been variation between patches on how much input people want up front and conscious that we might be entering into a lengthy process. Some people have been put off because the deer officer expectations are unrealistic or they can't reach agreement on numbers and there seems to be a bit of sensitivity there. Also asked if the response rate remains low, will

there be an option for a more proactive approach and those that are ready to be able to come forward.

POI advised that that in terms of being more open and proactive, we are working through the agreed process for inviting people and hoping that once all of this is on the system it will just work on the system, but at the moment we are working towards an online system that is still in development and we are having to make assumptions about how it is going to work. In terms of the species plan we did not pay for this before, it was part of the supplement. Regarding the guidance for what staff should be doing when reviewing plans that is something we can look at and would be interested to know more about that feedback.

NE commented that we are moving into a different way of working in the fact that there is one bucket with limited but shared access and feel there is a role to share this with audiences as it is a hard message for the state and the Forestry Commission.

JW responded that although at the moment we don't have a distinct ring-fenced woodland budget within FCP, uptake and delivery of outcomes will be monitored.

POI commented that at the moment Higher Tier will have its own budget that will be separate from SFI and the number of schemes we are projecting to do there should be budget for that.

DL asked if you need to apply to do the agroforestry plan first to get invited to apply for agroforestry. Regarding the capital grant, the fencing around each tree for a grazing option doesn't seem to currently be in place. Also, the annual management is only for 3 years but would want this to last at least 15 years to create some certainty.

POI responded that SFI actions are three years and these can be applied for at the moment for low and very low density on low sensitivity land. Agroforestry in Higher Tier will be a full suite of the capital items and revenue and will be ten-year agreements. To go for the Higher Tier you need to do the agroforestry plan and that will basically form the pre-application stage. When you have done the plan and are invited in for agroforestry that can include the revenue options and also the capital. On the fencing there are all the existing capital items available for fencing including individual tree protection and we are working on developing some further capital items and we are looking at trying to get those included in the coming year. To confirm the plan is optional for SFI but mandatory for Higher Tier.

GG wanted to echo **LH's** comments regarding some deer officers that have set personal expectations that aren't in the guidance or approved species management plans and this is not welcome.

POI responded that this needed some follow up work to address some of the deer concerns as the guidance around some of that is being updated at the moment.

EWCO/WCPG Work Plan 25-26

AR (Head of Incentives Development & Compliance, FC) presented slides.

LH commented that this is welcomed, particularly the potential for encouraging productive forestry and long-term management as well as additional contributions on the Forest Management Unit level are really interesting and have got ideas about how this could be approached if and when you are looking for suggestions. The part payment in advance would be very welcome and don't know if you have looked at other funding models around the country but where it has been used (Storm Arwen Recovery Fund) it has been a really useful mechanism in aiding cash flow. Other suggestions would be being able to put in claims upon ordering trees because at that point we've effectively got a contract with the nursery. Likewise with other materials where we have raised a purchase order as we have entered a binding contract and don't feel there is any legal difference between the two points of claim.

JW commented just to manage expectations that these are ideas rather than announcements so not everything will be taken forward.

NE commented that it would be good to know about prioritisation and also the scale of each of these in terms of effort to get them over the line as feel we are going to have to play in that prioritisation space increasingly.

AJ commented that really supportive of the long-term woodland management and keen to keep working with the FC on that. In terms of the productive forestry, very supportive of this but keen to understand what is different but as you develop these it would be great to be part of those conversations.

JB commented in terms of the productive forestry element with the national wood strategy, we have got a number of actions in there and potentially there could be an opportunity to work on some of these things about how we can get more productive forests and some of that might be through grants but also through other mechanisms. Would like to look at setting up a process group that can look at unlocking some of that potential.

JR asked if this is being looked at in terms of the stark reality that we need to double the output from EWCO and every other planting mechanism. In aggregate we are doing

half of what we know we need to and we can make tweaks but are those going to deliver the scale of change that is needed.

AR responded that this is a good point and goes back to **NE**'s point about prioritisation. We need to look at which of these is going to have the biggest impact on our uptake and also what is going to improve efficiencies for us to get things through the system. Looking at criteria and perhaps how we do that prioritization are key, knowing that some of these could be quite involved and we would what to work with you to take some of these forward. It could take time to get it right and we need to think about how much can we do in a year and with the resources available is going to be a difficult balance.

PO commented that it may be useful to use this group to help with that prioritisation and having a subgroup might really help you and there would be people willing to pick this up outside of this session.

PS commented that building on the point around the bigger picture thinking in terms of what has been called the Big 5 and how those priorities sit alongside all the other big pieces of work going on in government and ensuring that the priorities are aligned with that thinking and informed by this group.

AR responded that this was helpful feedback and will need to have some conversations with colleagues in Defra as well about their priorities so will take that away as an idea for us to share ahead of coming back in March when we need to have a clear idea of what we intend to do. Some engagement ahead of that will be welcome.

AOB

JW confirmed that the next meeting would take place on 13th March in Birmingham.

Meeting ended 12:30