

Ref: FCDAG 04/2025

DAG Minutes: 24/04/2025**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 (Sylva) **PO**Brian Fraser (HTA) **BF**James Russell (Community Forests) **JR**David Lewis (RICS) **DL**Dan Loader (NPFG) **DLo**Laura Bower (W&C LINK) **LB**Adrian Jowitt (Natural England) **AJ**John Bruce (Confor) **JB**Juli Titherington (Woodland Trust) **JT**Claire Douglas (RPA) **CD**Neville Elstone (ICF) **NE**Greg Vickers (RFS) **GV****FC/Defra:**Joe Watts (FC) **JW**Sarah Lawson (FC) **SL**Penny Oliver (FC) **POI**

Bethan Walke (FC) (observer)

Andrew Canning-Trigg (FC) **ACT**Mark Broadmeadow (FC) **MB**

Kashya Zapala (FC) (observer)

Apologies:

Simon James (Small Woods)

DAG Minutes

Welcome

JW opened the session and welcomed all.

'State of the Nation'

- Plans to reduce running costs of civil service by 15% and announcement of a cross-government review of Arms-Length Bodies. We have no further information and will be engaging as and when we are called to do so. Referred to Dan Corry Review in terms of how ALBs are organized and how Defra operates and regulates. Can be seen as a good opportunity to present the work we are doing. Also we show ourselves as the lead regulator for development of woodland creation proposals and how we harness advice and consultation from other regulators.
- Governments ideas on development and planning is an area that we need to keep an eye on but some of the concepts are covered in Andrew's agenda item.
- Some new Historic environment datasets have been published and available on the map browser and open portal and this should help inform woodland creation proposals.

PO asked about the reviews that were mentioned and queried whether these could be looked at further at some point.

JW responded that links to the reviews would be shared with the group.

Background to the reference to the Dan Corry review

[Delivering economic growth and nature recovery: an independent review of Defra's regulatory landscape - GOV.UK](#)

And the Government's response

[Major reforms to environmental regulation to boost growth and protect nature - GOV.UK](#)

Higher Tier Update

POI (Head of Environmental Land Management, FC) provided update and asked for feedback.

Current Pre-Application figures (24/04/2025):

Area Team	Pre-Application							
	Invites sent	Responses received	Declined Pre-app	Withdrawn (no response)	Accepted Pre-app	Pre-app Forms returned	WMPs requiring amendment	Approved
East and East Midlands	96	32	4	2	26	22	4	0
North West and West Midlands	69	39	2	5	37	30	3	0
South East and London	78	41	1	7	38	31	12	1
South West	108	54	7	6	48	36	2	0
Yorkshire and North East	95	55	2	3	54	45	2	0
Total	446	221	16	23	203	164	23	1

PO asked about the timeline for hearing back as had one that was submitted about a month and half ago and had notification that the form was received but have heard nothing since.

POI responded that as the forms are coming back to the FC these are triaged out to the Area teams and they should be picking them up so would have expected contact by now. Asked to send over the details so can check where that is.

PO also asked that as the online platform is not out for testing yet, what is the possible process if it's not ready in time and are you still planning to open in the summer?

POI responded that in terms of the system being ready in the summer, this is what we are working on and it is our understanding that this will happen. We are anticipating that when it opens those first people will be closely supported to make sure they get through the system and to check that it works.

DL commented that there are a number of woodland owners that have an approved management plan that is several years in and they would like to apply for the management grant but currently are not going to receive an invitation and wondered

what the scope is for these people going forward as it is not easy if they are already in the system. Also there is the issue for those that are half-way through their management plan and will probably have to do another one.

POI responded that so far we have invited people that haven't had a chance to apply previously and we have prioritized them for pre-application. We need to have a manageable pipeline that we can ensure we can get through. Not everybody is taking up the offer so we may be able to speed up getting through the pipeline and at some point in time we anticipate it will just be an open application. On people that have woodland management plans that will need to be renewed we have just updated the guidance for the planning grant (PA3). It previously said that this could only be re-done within the last year of a plan but this has been updated to give greater flexibility.

PS asked regarding those that you haven't heard back from, what is the current process. How many times are you chasing? Is there a time limit for cut off or are you still being quite flexible on those?

POI responded that everyone who hasn't responded has had 3 chasers. They will then go to the back of the queue as we can't have a totally open-ended process but there has been a lot of effort to chase people.

JR asked about the phased release approach and queried whether this was about managing expectations and testing systems or is it about managing budgets, thinking in the context of the SFI experience. Also asked if local authority woodlands have become eligible as heard that there may have been some changes.

POI commented that it's a new system that we are testing and also we couldn't deal with all applicants applying at once, so we need to phase it in some way and to check everything works as well. It's a controlled roll out to manage numbers but there is an aim for a number of agreements they want to do in a year and there is some attention on budget controls given what happened in SFI. It is for Defra to decide what those budgets are and how they want to control them. Our interest is to make sure the agreements get through the process and manage them in a sensible way. Regarding the local authority eligibility there has been some change to allow greater flexibility and the wording will be shared.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/countryside-stewardship-higher-tier-get-ready-to-apply/countryside-stewardship-higher-tier-preview-guidance#check-if-youre-eligible-to-apply> – see section 6.3

GG asked when contacting people if that is repeatedly through the same contact details.

POI responded that it is RPA chasing these not Forestry Commission. They will be chasing whoever is the lead person on the system. Area teams are aware and they are being notified before we tell RPA to remove people from the list so that they can flag if they are aware that someone should be responding.

Update on Planning Reform / Land Use Framework / Policy protection for ancient woodland

ACT (Head of Planning, Infrastructure & Built Environment, Policy & Advice Team, FC) presented slides.

JT asked how the Environmental Delivery Plans and the associated funder levy would match up with grants. Governments tend not to want to double pay for activities or areas. Feel that woodlands need a wider consideration from a land use perspective. Also asked if there is any appetite for woodland protection to be pulled into the Forestry Commission and not distributed among local authorities. There are different protections and when woodland gets felled it can fall between the cracks and it's hard to get prosecution because the bits of legislation don't match up. Many local authorities don't have the technology to know where all of their TPOs and important woodlands are. Could there be something within project WIDGET that could be used more centrally to ensure that information is a bit firmer and easier to follow through. Also there is talk about heritage trees, veteran trees and we talk about groups of trees and different types of protection. Has it been considered by the Forestry Commission that the default should be trees shouldn't be felled without a clear plan, which might be part of a management plan or at a smaller scale.

ACT responded around development contributions combining these with grants within the Nature Recovery fund, government will pump prime Nature Recovery fund but the intention is that it becomes self-funding and doesn't require public grant. There is the principle that the developer must pay for their impacts and this shouldn't come out of the public purse so don't think there will be a combination of grants. There is a statement that biodiversity net gain will continue to operate outside of the Nature Recovery fund.

Advised that in terms of bringing woodland protection into the FC, wouldn't want to see this happen as feel there is a benefit from having a local connection to the trees that people care about and there should be an element of local decision making in terms of priorities. The Forestry Commission can provide a consistent playing field so that people can accurately record and understand where those important assets are and where there is agreed mitigation for when you do have to impact on them. Noted the point regarding the local planning authorities not having the technology and think that is something we can hope to address going forward.

On heritage and veteran trees it would be good to get to a system where we have a clear understanding that trees shouldn't be felled without a clear plan. Feel we do have relatively good protection in terms of policy, but that isn't always being implemented effectively at a local level and need to look at the mechanisms around that.

JR asked in terms of the Land Use Framework, has the Forestry Commission taken a view on what feels like a tension between delivering EIP targets where they are easiest to deliver versus delivering them where they will be of the greatest benefit and this relates to your point about natural capital. In terms of devolution and the consolidated funding pots, asked for clarification if the Defra funds and schemes are in scope for being devolved. Also asked in terms of WIDGET, it sounded as though the work being moved forward is almost entirely focused on protection. Much of what the Community Forest have been doing is delivering benefits in terms of increasing tree cover on the back of development activity through the planning system. Need to ensure that we haven't lost sight of that balance that actually you can achieve net gain for tree cover through planning. On EDPs being 'owned' by Natural England need to mitigate any risks to benefitting trees.

ACT agreed there is a tension between the EIP targets where they are easiest to deliver and where we see the greatest benefit. Feel we will get better decisions if we understand what the natural capital benefits of doing the land use change are and take a long-term view. Currently the focus seems to be on the short-term economic growth output and that is not the best basis for making long-term land use change decisions. We have good accounts for the public forest estate, but don't have natural capital accounts as standard outside of that and there isn't a consistent approach. Some local nature recovery strategies have looked at a natural capital assessment and so there is a good model that could potentially be used.

In terms of the consolidated pots, Defra funds aren't currently mentioned in the Devolution white paper. Believe there will be a push in the future for more consolidation of different government agencies.

In terms of WIDGET in the guidance we refer to better linkages with biodiversity net gain in terms of off-site compensation and enhancement elsewhere, but we have largely focused on how trees and woodlands are dealt with in terms of protection rather than opportunities. There is a sister project, Trees and Woodlands as Nature Based Solutions, which is looking at how developments can use trees to address environmental problems, looking at the opportunities where woodland creation can be brought forward. We are keen to advocate that particularly around the New Towns commission and creating Forest towns where you commit to a canopy cover target at the start and as part of the

strategic master planning you set out how you are going to use trees and what benefits you will derive from them.

For Environmental Delivery Plans we are concerned that trees won't be well reflected. When development happens in urban areas we don't tend to see large scale tree loss, which means there is a concern that some of the habitat creation may not address tree creation as well as would like. We want to work with Natural England to achieve the best outcomes and we are at the early stages of this work.

DL queried regarding the Land Use framework and how the land use change for forestry will be judged to deliver the best outcomes. We have the low sensitivity map that is useful for identifying the constraints but a low sensitivity area is not necessarily the best place to put a woodland. How do you juggle those competing authorities and is there any way you can measure what might deliver the best outcomes?

ACT responded that linking with local nature recovery strategies has been a good opportunity to explore where different bodies come together and look at the best outcome and this is where woodland creation can address a number of problems and optimistic that the land use framework can set a context for doing that and look at woodland creation as an opportunity rather than where it is easiest. Noted the point that low sensitivity mapping is about constraints and not about where you will get the best outcome and this needs to be addressed through the way that you deal with natural capital.

MB commented that on targeting grounds, we already do it through the additional contributions in EWCO and also we can combine the LNRS strategies with the low sensitivity mapping to bring these together to identify where there is support within the LNRS for woodland creation and the lower sensitivities. Feel there are opportunities to focus on opportunities as well as constraints.

Regulating woodland creation to protect water resources

MB (Head of Climate Change, Policy & Advice Team, FC) presented slides.

NE commented that it was said that you can't model some of the good stuff that trees do and so we have modelled what we can and it is important that this is shared in the future because it is an important caveat.

MB agreed and advised that he had raised this point. It is incredibly difficult to model that side of it because the modelling is from JULES, which is the Met Office's big model and pushing to get infiltration quantified better is a struggle.

JT commented that when you have areas experiencing flooding and extreme climate change events, how do you balance using this from a land use perspective versus using this as a reason not to use the nature-based solutions that are available by planting woodland and how do you control that messaging.

MB responded that this process is identifying what the potential impacts on water resources are and then this will provide the evidence to go on to the next discussion regarding what are the trends in abstraction licences, what are the flood risks versus impacts on water resources.

JT also asked about calibration as it was mentioned that less than ten applications triggered using this approach but has this been checked to make sure that is the right level and things haven't slipped through that should have flagged up or vice versa.

MB responded that those ten should have been through the process and then had that discussion with the Environment Agency but this hasn't been implemented at the moment, we are piloting it. Any proposals that the Area teams flag up are being looked at. We are scrutinising proposals at the moment and testing the system to make sure it works.

GG commented that interested in the modelling, looking at it at tree level but also asked if the completeness of the model is being compared with empirical evidence from different land uses in different catchments. Tree planting is in replacement of other land uses and other land use water regimes, both how the water is used by people and the vegetation and also it would be good to know about the modelling beyond catchment.

MB responded that the R-Shiny app does have existing land cover within the integrated water body and the impact of removing whichever vegetation type and replacing it with trees. The impact on water yield for the integrated water body catchment is calculated in cubic metres per day and so this can be used as evidence of the impact of the water use when replacing the vegetation cover and this forms part of the further discussion. The water use calculations were based on the JULES model and some changes had to be made because it is a global model so there needed to be some national parameterization to make it applicable to the UK for this purpose.

GG queried if looking at timing of flow as well as volumes of water.

MB responded that it is not looking at timings of flow as this is incredibly challenging, it is looking at an annual figure. Also commented that because the vulnerability maps are based on extreme low flows, it is looking at the average and also where those extreme low flows have gone below the threshold limit so it is looking at extremes and what the impact would be of the woodland on the extremes at an annual time-step.

GG responded that you may have situations where a land use model yields less water but more of it is useful.

MB agreed and advised that this is where the discussion is had with the Environment Agency and this is in effect a screening tool.

JR commented that it is a really good bit of due diligence that provides a framework to then have a more constructive discussion with the Environment Agency and others. Curious how this would play out for something like the Paulownia plantations where they are on land that already benefits from irrigation with existing abstraction licences.

MB responded that this is part of the discussion with the Environment Agency. Knowing what the modelled water use is and it is actually quite complicated with Paulownia because we don't know what the water use is precisely. It is a challenge and it is a consideration of any Environmental Impact Assessment.

AOB

JW commented that the tree production grants have been opened today:

The three capital grants re-opened today (24/04/2025):

[Tree Production Capital Grant - GOV.UK](#)

[Tree Production Innovation Fund - GOV.UK](#)

[Seed Sourcing Grant - GOV.UK](#)

NE asked whether there is any update on funding for things like training.

JW responded that there is nothing to announce at the moment.

JW confirmed that the next meeting would take place on 5th June.

Meeting ended 12:09