

Ref: FCDAG 06/2025

DAG Minutes: 05/06/2025**Location:** Webinar/teleconference**Chair:** Joe Watts**Secretary:** Sarah Lawson**Attendees****DAG Members:**Graham Garratt (ICF) **GG**Poppy Sherborne (NFU) **PS**Paul Orsi (Sylva) **PO**James Russell (Community Forests) **JR**David Lewis (RICS) **DL**Luke Hemmings (NPFPG) **LH**John Deakin (National Trust) **JD**Simon Marrington (Woodland Management Companies) **SM**Laura Bower (W&C LINK) **LB**Adrian Jowitt (Natural England) **AJ**Kate Palmer (Confor) **KP**Neville Elstone (ICF) **NE**Greg Vickers (RFS) **GV**Graham Clark (CLA) **GC****FC/Defra:**Joe Watts (FC) **JW**Sarah Lawson (FC) **SL**Tom Sunley (FC) **TS**David Robertson (FC) **DR**Evelina Budrike (FC) **EB**Rebecca Naylor (FC) **RN**Chris Tomlin (FC) **CT**Katherine Flynn (Defra) **KF****Apologies:**

Simon James (Small Woods)

Clive Thomas (Soil Association)

John Bruce (Confor)

Jackie Dunne (Confor)

DAG Minutes

Welcome

JW opened the session and welcomed all. Welcomed new members to the group, Simon Marrington (Woodland Management Companies) and John Deakin (National Trust).

'State of the Nation'

- Permanent Secretary, Tamara Finkelstein to leave Defra after six years, the new interim permanent secretary is David Hill.
- Following the new agreement with the EU, we need to work out what that means for forestry and plant health.
- The HLS payments will go up in 2025 - they haven't increased for a decade and had fallen behind scheme.
- The Farming Equipment and Technology Fund opened on 29th May and that includes the provision of forestry equipment.
- There is a new EWCO application form and we won't accept the old forms from 30th June.
- We are still working towards the opening of Higher Tier applications in the summer.
- Following the Spending Review announcements next Wednesday, we don't expect immediate clarity in terms of what that means for the Forestry Commission and will need that to trickle down through Defra but will share the implications when we know.

JR asked regarding the definition of 'summer' as it is important to be able to manage expectations.

JW advised that we can't be more specific at the moment. We are asking for the information and will share as soon as we can.

GG commented that still waiting to be invited into pre application and asked if this is an ongoing process or will there be a wait until the first group have gone into schemes.

JW confirmed that we are still sending out invites for pre application. There will come a point when it's open and we won't need the pre application work, but we are not there yet.

GC asked in terms of the Spending Review and if there was anything further regarding timescales before there would be clarity for the Forestry Commission.

JW responded that there isn't anything further to be said at the moment. Following some spending reviews, information has come through quite quickly and others have taken longer and can't really speculate.

JD commented that in terms of invitations coming through to the National Trust under one SBI and with the way the portal works, this is creating a challenge in terms of a bottleneck when one application can potentially hold things up. Can we look at a more strategic way of working.

JW asked **JD** to contact Penny Oliver so that this can be looked at as would like to think we can find a way around this.

Historic environment opportunity for new woodland map

TS (National Historic Environment Datasets Project Manager, FC) presented slides.

GG asked regarding the use and if it is something we need to be aware of or whether we will be signposted to the map when producing plans. Regarding it being on FC map [browser](#), confirmed this was LIS and commented there is already a lot of information on there and it gets more difficult to know which layers need to be looked at. Asked if the information will be embedded within a broader layer as looks like it isn't titled as historic information. Queried if it is something that needs to be looked at when thinking about existing woodland or just orientated towards new woodlands. Also asked if the classifications are recognised and accepted by third parties.

TS responded that the data is designed in theory for woodland creation but can be used when thinking about existing woodland. Currently it isn't in the map browser/LIS but it is scheduled to be added soon; it can currently be downloaded from FC's [data portal](#). We will need to draw people's attention through the FC eAlert that it is there. The classifications were derived by our internal team of specialists and there was a wider group of external partners consulted so hopefully there shouldn't be contentions from other parties but appreciate that every case is different.

TS advised after the meeting that the *Historic Environment Opportunity for New Woodland map* is now available (as of 9th June) to all users on the FC External Map Browser [Forestry Commission Map Browser](#) in the 'Targeting and Scoring' section

GG commented that in terms of publicity and signposting, woodland creation tends to be a periodic thing and we aren't working on it all the time. Therefore, putting the

information in an eAlert may not help people months later. It needs to be evident in the guidance and linked to in the forms.

TS advised that the historic environment general guidance does now link to it but agreed that other links may be useful.

PS commented on the issues they have been seeing with SHINE features and raised some concerns based on experience with agri environment schemes. They are non designated at a local level and a landowner might not be aware of them and they are not always what they are mapped to be. A lot of members have been challenging the presence of SHINE features as they are acting as a barrier to them accessing funding. There is not a legal issue but it is purely how the scheme design aligns with local mapping. It is interesting to see SHINE features being treated in the same way as designated features in the opportunity map and wonder whether there is an ability to not use a binary approach and treat those features in a different way or for there to be a consent process in place to avoid issues.

TS responded that the SHINE data in the project came as part of a data enhancement exercise where we have asked local authority owners to improve their SHINE data to avoid issues. We have access to live SHINE data and so will be the latest version although aware that it's not complete and doesn't remove need to engage with local historic environment services about the data. Aware that the way SHINE is run is down to RPA systems but hoping that with tools like this and engaging with the sector that creates the original data we are going to be working towards resolving some of the issues. FC is asking local historic environment services to be more careful and mindful when creating SHINE records.

GC commented that hoping it is going to be used as a tool to inform decisions rather than make things more difficult. Sometimes landowners may have records that show something different to the datasets and hoping there will be a facility where this is considered rather than using a binary approach.

TS advised that this is part of a decision-making tool kit rather than creating a binary yes or no. It isn't statutory and this opportunity map is a tool kit and is a guide so people can bring different information and still require engagement with local historic environment services. People can enter into those conversations with more information or are able to ask more relevant questions. In terms of the categories, we were keen to keep the number quite small to make it more usable. It is important to note that even areas classified as unsuitable doesn't mean that woodland creation can't happen. It is a balanced suite of UKFS considerations and its just saying from a historic environment point of view it wouldn't be recommended but it isn't a no go.

DL asked if you are doing a EWCO application there has been a need to consult with the county council archaeologist which can add delays and costs so will this new map remove the need to do this. Also asked if this will relate to agroforestry options as well.

TS confirmed that there is still a requirement to go to the local authorities at the moment but it should mean that you are having a more informed conversation and that they are much more on board with concepts and ethos of forestry. Agreed that there would be no reason that this isn't used in agroforestry.

TS advised after the meeting that the EWCO Grant Manual has been updated to reference the Opportunity Map and is mentioned on page 31 of the manual [England Woodland Creation Offer \(EWCO\) grant manual](#)

SM asked about the classification of Ridge and Furrow and noticed this was classified as above 20 cm being deemed as unsuitable. Is this indicative of the age? This classification could be used a blocker if not careful and tree cover on ridge and furrow is not always a bad option compared to alternatives.

TS responded that Ridge and Furrow is in two tiers based on the height. We are creating some Ridge and Furrow guidance that will be published to help people.

DR confirmed that the Forestry Commission is working on Ridge and Furrow guidance for woodland creation and woodland management. It has been requested by the forestry sector for a few years and it is currently in early draft. A firmed up draft will be brought to the DAG group for your comment and input before it is published which will hopefully be later this year depending on how things progress.

GC asked in terms of the historic former areas of woodland how far did you go back and what data sets did you draw that information from.

TS advised that went back using Ordnance Survey second edition maps (c. 1888-1913) and compared the woodland on there to the National Forest Inventory. From there you can work out where there used to be wood and there isn't wood now and that's what derives the lost historic woodland. We used AI as it could do it across the whole country in a consistent way.

Customer Focus: Progress Update

EB (Head of Operations (Forest Services), FC) and **RN** (Area Marketing and Communications Manager, FC) presented slides.

GV asked how the CRM tool will extend to Woodland Officers in the field and how are they going to take notes and enter these into the system. Also commented that in terms of an enquiry form on the website don't find these very user friendly and would rather call or email someone.

EB advised that the call handling is run through a triage system and the call will go initially to the admin officer in the area team who will know which woodland officers are available to take calls and so a Woodland Officer who is out in the field and unreachable shouldn't get a call. Also in terms of keeping notes, there is not just CRM, we have the Grant Management System which can be used. CRM is more about managing the leads in terms of the woodland owners and managers that are within scope of becoming customers. That journey will lead from the customer records as in your potential to then grant management where we manage and have all the information.

RN commented that as agents and landowners have direct relationships with Woodland Officers they will sometimes be calling them directly. The idea is that Woodland Officers will be almost constantly logged into CRM as any interaction will need to be logged with just brief notes and next actions, which will be a mandatory requirement. Once in CRM, Woodland Officers will be able to email from the system and this will be automatically uploaded. In terms of a single point of contact we wanted to make sure that everybody is having the same experience and that there is consistency. With the form on GOV.UK we can gather information straight away and should be able to triage people more efficiently.

GC asked how it works if there are other agencies involved and liaison is required with other bodies. There may be tricky sites and the resolution may be out of the control of the Forestry Commission. How do we handle that sort of situation when we are looking for a smooth customer journey.

EB responded that we are building our relationships with partner agencies and we are looking to break those barriers and piloting potentially more difficult cases through working together and see what we can learn from this. We monitor our cases and we have local connections to overcome or understand why cases cannot progress.

NE asked if the CRM was site based, owner or applicant based.

RN responded (in chat): Contact based - so tracking interactions from landowners agents and stakeholders, and then underneath landowners, site cases (and then applications once they become applicants).

JR commented that need to reflect on the fact that the tools are available to try and deliver government policy targets so if we have the offer right we need to make it easy

for people to deliver what the government policy would like them to do is critical as that is where most of the barriers and frustrations have been.

EB responded that in terms of making it easier for customers to deliver this is what Defra customer enabling team looked at. They looked at the percentage of applications that were returned to customers and this was quite high for example for missing information. This tells us that we need to be better at communicating or explaining what we need so that it empowers the customer and puts them in a better position. Looking at real metrics we can pick up where improvements are needed in our approach to the customer journey.

Update on the review of managing ancient and native woodland practice guide

CT (Policy Adviser – Natural Environment, FC) presented slides.

NE asked how much workshop one is about species rather than the American RAD approach and localness and genetics seems as important as species.

CT responded that we are looking at resilience and other approaches within that, the localness and genetics is a key part. It is in the current guidance and expect this to continue through but we are looking at whether we can be more flexible.

PO asked how the decisions will be made during and after the workshop.

CT responded that would hope that we will be able to reach a consensus but what we will do is take away the comments and review and it will be a decision-making session with Defra, ourselves and NE and to look at how to move forward based on the evidence but also customer feedback.

LH raised a plea to get a few more practitioners included in the first session if possible. Understand that there will be a limit but it sounded slightly more skewed towards the environmental aspect at the moment.

CT responded that they will need to look at numbers and work with Defra and NE to agree numbers and we can look at the invite list.

DL commented that it was good to see the inclusion of wood pasture and parkland and a plea that this guidance link into the Countryside Stewardship options for the creation and restoration of wood pasture and parklands as clearer guidance would be welcomed.

CT responded that this tracks through into the ancient woodland as well as our existing PAWS supplement and we are working with NGR colleagues to see how when we are producing guidance how that all tracks through.

GG commented that the point made about the percentage of honorary natives being justified by timber interests don't feel is valid. From an interagency dialogue, not sure this should be offered as a timber concession although it's still of value for other purposes.

CT commented that we recognise there are other benefits from having a mixed, diverse woodland and that's where we want to get to.

LB enquired from the Woodland pasture and Parkland network who would be invited to the workshops.

CT advised that we are working with Nigel Pilling who sits on the group. There is a January board to look at the Condition Assessment development. That's not a key component of this project, as we need to allow time to build and test any condition assessment.

AOB

JW confirmed that this would be his last DAG meeting and thanked everyone for their support and contributions. Also advised that the next meeting would take place on 17th July.

Meeting ended 12:04