

Ref: FCDAG 09/2025

**DAG Minutes:** 18/09/2025**Location:** The Priory Rooms/ teleconference**Chair:** Jane Hull**Secretary:** Sarah Lawson**Attendees****DAG Members:**Graham Garratt (ICF) **GG**Poppy Sherborne (NFU) **PS**Greg Vickers (RFS) **GV**Clive Thomas (Soil Association) **CT**Julian Burchby (Confor) **JB**Jackie Dunne (Confor) **JD**Luke Hemmings (NPPF) **LH**Neville Elstone (ICF) **NE**Ian Froggatt (Woodland Trust) **IF**David Lewis (RICS) **DL**Simon James (Small Woods) **SJ**John Deakin (National Trust) **JDe**

Online: Claire Douglas (RPA) **CD**, Adrian Jowitt (Natural England) **AJ**, Laura Bower (LINK) **LB**, James Russell (Community Forests) **JR**

**FC/Defra:**Jane Hull (FC) **JH**Sarah Lawson (FC) **SL**Jim O'Neill (FC) **JO**Alec Rhodes (FC) **AR**Richard Hofman (FC) **RH**John Place (Defra) **JP**

Online: Louise Alexander (FC) **LA**, Vicki Howlett (FC) **VH**, Clare Emerson (Defra) **CE**, Hannah Newbold (Defra) **HN**, Chris Tomlin (FC) **CTo**, Rachel Sparks (FC) **RS**, Heather Gibbard (FC) **HG**, Hugh Loxton (Defra) **HL**, Rhianne Harris (FC) **RHa**

**Apologies:**

John Bruce (Confor)

John Blessington (Local Gov)

Brian Fraser (HTA)

Paul Orsi (Sylva)

Graham Clark (CLA)

Simon Marrington (WMC)

## DAG Minutes

### Welcome

**JH** opened the session and welcomed all.

#### State of the Nation

- Key Announcement: Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier opened today. The new CSHT scheme has now opened for applications. To apply, customers must have:
  - been invited to apply
  - received pre-application advice
  - completed any preparatory work, including Woodland Management, Species Management and Agroforestry Plans

Eligible farmers, foresters and land managers will be invited to apply on a rolling monthly basis from September onwards.

See CSHT opens for applications on the Defra farming blog for more information.

- Ministerial Update: In the reshuffle Mary Creagh remains Forestry Minister. Emma Reynolds joins as Secretary of State from the Treasury; Angela Eagle as Farming Minister. Ministers are focused on issues such as nature recovery, green finance, and water quality.
- *Ips typographus* - successful eradication of beetle in the 13 sites identified in 2021. Ips media coverage – <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/war-against-tree-beetle-sees-eradications-around-england>
- Woodland Carbon Code re-released in August 2025. Woodland Carbon code changes - [Woodland Carbon Code Version 3.0 | Woodland Carbon Code](#)
- James Murdoch, Head of Regulations, has resigned so will be recruiting soon.
- Recruitment for three new Forestry Commissioners is underway (deadline: 2 October). Forestry Commissioner applications - <https://apply-for-public-appointment.service.gov.uk/roles/8925>
- Lisa Brooks, senior leader from the UK Plant Health Service in Defra, is moving to FC on 13<sup>th</sup> October to become our new Chief Operating Officer
- Other links that may be of interest:
  - Join the national monitoring project - [Help prevent establishment of spruce bark beetle by joining national monitoring project - Forest Research](#)
  - What motivates you to make sustainable choices - <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/news/nudge-theory-meets-forestry/>
- Minutes from last meeting confirmed. Action Log reviewed.

## Update on EWCO/WCPG Customer Enabling Work

Presented by:

**LA, VH** (Incentives Development National Team Managers, FC)

**HN** (Content Improvement Team, Defra), **CE** (Improving Customer Delivery Team, Defra)

**GG** commented that it is much needed piece of work. Asked what provisions are being put in place for new guidance in future schemes and to make sure that testing and rationalisation are implemented at an early stage.

**AR** responded that lessons have been learnt. There were time pressures to prepare and launch EWCO and defaulted to what believed would work and could put in place quickly. Also have struggled with the capacity to get systems internally up and running and to then have time to work on the evolution and continuous improvements.

**GG** does this experience give you ability to request more time to get it right.

**AR** agreed that it is important to get benefits from keeping people engaged with a digestible set of guidance whilst delivering within the budget and timescales.

**LA** responded that one key point of learning is avoiding duplication. Also need to ensure that we start with the user in mind from the beginning.

**GV** asked regarding the period of funding for EWCO and if there is a deadline for when funding is going to run out.

**JH** responded that this is always subject to business planning year to year but there are national legal targets about increasing the percentage of woodland cover so it would be top of our spending review discussions.

**LH** commented that can see the improvements but it would be more helpful for professionals to get to know a scheme and become more efficient with it, rather than having to deal with constant changes. Feel like there is an intention to try and go for direct applicants and smaller schemes which doesn't feel like the right approach. There seems to be an exclusion of agents and less support for professionals.

**JD** echoed **LH's** comments and welcomed reducing some of the content but advised that there was nothing wrong with the form. Thought the Fast Track programme was for those low risk areas where people could do it themselves online. As agents, 83% of applications come from us and that is because it is a complex decision and we do a lot of

background work. Need to acknowledge that your users are different and need a variety of content. PDFs are useful and don't want a fully digital service as need to be able to put in break points whilst we go back to clients.

**LA** responded that the new files will be printable so this shouldn't be an issue.

**NE** commented that need to look at how to make it easier for agents to say yes and how to create a smoother journey and learn from previous iterations of work.

**GV** commented that we need to be more supportive of the professional industry and rather than designing forms for the lay person we should be encouraging people to seek help from professionals.

**AR** responded that our work is to simplify it for everyone and not exclude anyone from the process. Heard the challenge that EWCO is complicated from agents as well as landowners. We are trying to streamline but the process is still trying to do a lot. Not trying to dumb it down, but perhaps there is some further work to be done to make sure it works for agents.

**LA** commented that all users were included, so agents as well as landowners. Acknowledge that some people will be very familiar with the EWCO process but some people will be submitting their first application and the process needs to work for all.

**CE** commented that the initial discovery report was based on statistics and hypothesis testing. One third of applications showed there was no statistical difference in terms of mistakes made by agents as those made by landowners, suggesting some of them also struggled with the complexities of the application. Work is based on the statistics and from user research, trying to increase accessibility for all users. The statistical analysis will be re-done to check whether improvements have been made.

**JO** raised that we are all users of GOV.UK and in terms of increasing clarity, this is welcome as it has an effect in terms productivity and timescales. If deliverers can come up with solutions we need to listen and have a good feedback process. Understand that constant change is not always welcomed but should look for constant improvement.

**IF** asked if the learning from this programme would be applied to other grants in the Defra family and if there would be a lessons learnt document that would come out of this. Also raised a concern regarding whether simplifying the process by breaking it up would actually speed it up in reality or actually slow it down.

**LH** commented that biggest delays seem to be those handover points and not knowing where things are in the system. The lack of visibility is a frustration.

**JB** commented that increased visibility would improve delivery as agents cannot plan and start ordering things until we have some certainty and so you'd see more schemes in the ground more quickly.

**JDe** asked if you had considered links with other grant schemes interfacing with Woodland Creation Planning Grant. Will it make it more difficult to access that?

**AR** responded that we need to think about whether there is an opportunity to bring the planning grant more into the EWCO process but don't want to disadvantage other funding mechanisms from having a UKFS compliant plan that the planning grant gives.

**JR** (from chat): There is seemingly an assumption in parts of FC that any WCPG process will result in a EWCO application. This isn't correct, as many landowners/agents/Community Forest teams are using WCPG to work up a proposal before then pursuing other funding options. WCPG should serve the purposes of the outcome (i.e. woodland creation), not any funding stream for delivering - it really needs to be agnostic on delivery funding.

**VH** (from chat): Just to reiterate there is no intention to remove the ability for people to apply solely to WCPG at this point. We want to make it easier for applicants to move from WCPG into EWCO, yes, but this will not become the only pathway.

### **Spruce Site Assessment Fund**

Presented by: **RS** (Incentives Development National Team Manager, FC)

**GG** asked for clarification regarding the difference between proactive spruce removal area and priority spruce removal areas.

**RS** explained the distinction between a higher intervention rate that would automatically be eligible for a higher payment rate in the east and a lower rate in a highlighted area in the West. Although advised if you have poor quality spruce in the West you could still be eligible for the higher rate.

**JDe** asked if the policy was now to remove all spruce from these areas - now and in the future to create a kind of sanitation buffer.

**RS** confirmed the aim to create a sanitation buffer. Funding will support removal, especially in priority zones.

**AR** commented that our policy is that we wouldn't support spruce planting within schemes in those areas.

**NE** asked how we deal with PAWS in relation to this where dying spruce may be better than quickly removed spruce.

**RS** responded that it would be the felling licence that dictates what can be felled and will dictate whether it is UKFS compliant. For proactive felling there must be a felling licence in place and it be restocked. We are currently facing a potential emergency if this spreads to spruce further afield. We have looked at where spruce is removed in Plantation on Ancient Woodland (PAWS) area, whether these can be restocked with conifer species but there is very little spruce on PAWS in the proactive spruce removal area.

**JH** added that the spruce beetle attacks trees that are not in good health so dying spruce would be a high-risk factor.

**NE** asked which is the greater emergency: protecting PAWS or protecting spruce and where the balance is around that.

**JH** agreed and advised this is in discussion. Referred to a restocking link recognizing what we have learnt about PAWS restoration but also looking at what happens if people are faced with an SPHN and ensuring they have an opportunity to restock with productive species.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/667ae56b4ae39c5e45fe4c3a/Restocking\\_Policy\\_guide\\_updated\\_June\\_2024.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/667ae56b4ae39c5e45fe4c3a/Restocking_Policy_guide_updated_June_2024.pdf)

**IF** asked whether as part of the survey on PAWS sites, are you identifying remnant features that you will need to protect. There is nothing in the form about those features. If you are paying a consultant to do this survey for you it seems like a good opportunity to map those features at that time.

**RS** responded that there is not a lot of detail in the survey but when someone applies for a felling licence they will need to go into that detail to make sure it is UKFS compliant. Point of the survey is to understand whether the landowner is willing to engage and fell the trees.

**LH** queried why consulting with the Woodland Trust

**RS** advised that we were engaging with Woodland Trust directly as they were the party that raised concerns on restocking options originally, so this was continuing the dialogue with them. This has been developed in a very short timescale to try and get work done

this year. Going forward there will be scope to feed into wider discussions to make improvements.

### Update on Tree Protection Project/ MANW guidance review and stakeholder session feedback

Presented by: **CT** (Policy Adviser – Natural Environment, FC)

**GG** shared thoughts on previous workshop: commented on percentages between exotics, the honorary natives and native species which should be evidence based as may not work in many situations. Need to consider whether all ancient wood is going to be treated the same or if there is a distinction between semi natural and PAWS. Many were from the conservation sector. Allowing disturbance is important as woods become ecologically richer. There is social license for a certain degree of disturbance. It's important when looking at ancient woodlands to understand societal value so there isn't fixed rigid set of restrictions.

**SJ** reflected that Atlantic rainforest seems bit of a current theme and questioned regarding other NVC classifications. The most support and advice in balancing need for intervention is not the highest or lowest value ancient woodland, but in the middle range. Also noted that ancient woodlands can be managed commercially and they need encouragement and guidance on how to achieve that.

**AJ** echoed **GG**'s comments that there are different ways to manage these woodlands and as part of sustainability and being economically managed. At top end there will be some sites where we should be focused on actions around improving nature recovery value but there is a big grey area in the middle where we can look for multiple outcomes.

**JD** commented that as managers and industry need to look at how we get people to look at the features in their woodlands, at what needs protection. Resilience is so important and there is so much we can do with other species but we need to develop our understanding. Need flexibility and look at the positive and negative impacts of species. Need advice regarding what to look for and looking at features is important and need to use expertise.

**JDe** commented on the importance of ancient woodlands particularly as we face a climate and biodiversity crisis. It is crucial that we get the approach to management right. Want to see much more active management but how we do that at scale is key. Need to make advice and guidance accessible and ensure that it doesn't become too complex. Raised importance of Woodland Condition Assessment which is all about

assessing the features, looking at resilience and sustainability and thinking about that to drive the interventions that are required. We've got great frameworks which should be used to underpin decision making around ancient woodlands without adding complexity. Also encourage not to make distinctions between commercial, productive and others as ultimately want more activity in our woodlands and need to focus on that as that is good for all of the outcomes.

**CT** responded that in terms of the Woodland Condition Assessment the criteria will be looked at as part of the guidance itself but with additional features such as resilience and economic management objectives.

**CTh** commented that as move towards reducing number of different terms for same things asked if we can ensure that we keep this joined up at a UK level. Understand that the guidance that is helping to implement policy is a devolved issue but good to keep terms and definitions at a UK level.

**CT** responded that we are conscious that if we make changes to terminology there are effects in other areas. There are difficulties in providing flexible and simple guidance that is easy to use and can be implemented consistently across a diverse range of woodlands by our woodland officers and the sector.

**JD** asked if it would be good to understand how it links to woodland management plans as this will be where we are predicting what more details we are going to be looking at in specific woodlands.

**CT** advised that it will sit as guidance that we will be implementing.

## Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier Update

Presented by:

**JP** (FCP, Defra)

**RH, RHa, JO** (ELM Team Managers, FC)

**GG** commented that when completing the PA7 form to manually put in field parcel numbers and splitting these between the first and second part are a lot of work and often cost as much as the grant is worth. This has put people off and decided to do it privately. Can't see any SM training provision for grey squirrel, but this is really needed.

**JH** noted comment regarding squirrel training and commented that this would be taken away.

**DL** commented that haven't received pre-app invites for some clients that feel should be invited and wondered what criteria is. Also asked regarding those that are already in existing agreements that didn't apply for any of options if there will be an opportunity for them to access the supplements or will they have to wait until their agreement expires.

**RHa** advised invites are going to registered contact on rural payments so if registered person isn't correct this will need to be updated. We can check where somebody is on the pipeline if you are expecting an invite. With regards to access to deer and squirrel support on older agreements, that isn't going to be available until their agreement ends.

**RH** confirmed and although there is an agreed policy position that would be eligible for deer and squirrel to be standalone but at the moment they can't be stacked and there is no functionality to do that at this point in time.

**JD** commented that in terms of the pipeline registered email this can be tricky as unaware if email has gone out and some agents and landowners aren't prioritising it.

**LH** queried if the email could go to the RPA inbox as well.

**RHa** asked for further details so this could be raised with RPA to see if this was possible.

**LH** asked if there is a capital limit within an application.

**JP** confirmed that there isn't as long as it aligns with the work you are doing.

**LH** queried whether the descriptions of each action have been updated and if there is more certainty about the actions are going to be applied under each supplement. Also wanted to check if any of the rates have changed. In terms of the Ride payments, like to do these but the rate is not enough to reflect the work and similarly with the PA7 forms. Applying for the Woodland Condition Assessment was easy for the whole SBI. Can this be the same for species management plans as generally it's for the whole property. Commented that the new templates are much better and responses have been positive particularly for deer.

**JP** and **RH** confirmed rates haven't changed since December.

**RH** responded that wasn't aware that people were needing to apply at parcel level and agree that this isn't practical and will take this away.

**PS** commented that NFU have received concerns regarding the guidance which is within a legal agreement which could include a tenancy agreement. If a tenancy agreement

said you had environmental obligations could you still apply for a higher tier agreement whether you are the tenant or landlord. They are worried that it might limit people if they are a tenant. Asked about whether agreements can be transferred to new agreement holder. Also raised point about funding gaps in agreements going forwards and concern can't apply until agreement has actually expired.

**JP** responded that it would depend on what they were trying to do as a tenant but it shouldn't be an issue. It is largely standard wording but something that can be looked at. Thought could transfer but will check.

**JD** commented regarding the rolling programme. One of benefits was that having written our ten year woodland management plans that would last the whole of the grant agreement. However some are now nearly two years in and are going to run out during the agreement. It is suggested that when a management plan is approved it then ends with that agreement end date. Also asked about quarterly payments and how it will work.

**JP** responded that you would get quarterly payments and at end of first year you would complete your declaration and also Forestry Commission would be checking assessments.

**RH** commented that in new year we will be looking at management plans. They need to not just be a tool to serve grants. We will consider how we can use the management plan approval to springboard for people who wish to enter higher tier. An aim is to reduce pressure with the dead time between management planning approval and being able to apply if we can be more agile and streamlined.

**NE** asked about the sharing of knowledge and understanding and ensuring that there is consistency with this when we have new systems being rolled out. Don't want to repeat these questions with individual users and receive varying answers. In the past there was training sessions so perhaps need to consider the way this is communicated.

**JH** confirmed that there is training rolling out internally and there will be webinars.

**JB** raised that had a client had WS1 payment refused as stalking hours recorded were lower than was in the deer management plan, even though the cull numbers were close. Feel this may be an issue with other landowners. Also commented on pine marten release and within a certain distance you can't undertake squirrel control using live or lethal traps and asked if this has been considered.

**RH** confirmed that you can use live traps but you have to agree to check them. Can look to get some more information out on protected species.

**JDe** echoed **PS**'s concerns regarding tenancies as this will be an increasing issue. Looking to move some of our woodlands into farm tenancies. We are going to want to have some shared agreement about the management priorities but don't want it to be detrimental to the tenant being able to access grants.

**GG** asked in response to **JB**'s comment on pine martens if there is flexibility within the agreement on grey squirrel management to review and change what you are doing.

**RH** asked for feedback on new PA7 templates

**GG** advised that the template doesn't allow you to show how you have worked out your hours. The columns are too rigid and it would be helpful for the woodland officer if they could see these calculations. Also raised concerns that if put so many hours down, but may try to use remote sensing which would be quicker. We don't want to be in a position where penalised and refused payment because we have invested in the technology so there needs to be some sort of indemnity.

**RH** advised would consider this as trying to take a fairer and more proportionate response and look at the intention and what the outcome will be. Referred to **JB**'s comments about refused payment and said that perhaps this needs to be looked at, as this doesn't sound like it meets with the new thinking we are working towards.

**JDe** confirmed that he had experienced the same issue with meeting cull targets but not meeting the target on hours. It needs to be clear on whether outcome focused or meeting targets and we need that understanding.

**JD** commented need to get that feedback when something is wrong as currently the only time the client gets to know is when the RPA don't pay which can be months later. In general estates have worked really hard and not always reflected.

**GV** commented that on one of estates had a great year in terms of squirrel management and as a result the numbers aren't as high this year and as there will be less hours may potentially get penalised for doing a good job.

**RH** responded that working through challenges on cull forms and so having some space for comment and mitigating circumstances to capture things like less hours deliberate because traps aren't catching could be built in.

**JD** commented regarding deer not having deer officer visiting the site is making some clients unsure and would really like to see that improved.

**JH** noted comment and advised it would be an aspiration but it can be difficult in terms of geography and case loads.

**RH** asked for feedback regarding customer webinars and thoughts on whether this should be split by species.

**JD** commented that the deer is unique in how it's been managed and need to make sure it is done correctly. It is potentially a lot of money and understand that you need the evidence and most clients just want to get it right.

**NE** challenged whether a webinar is the answer. It's about getting the communication and dialogue right and that might be using different ways, so maybe different national webinars alongside drop in sessions and other methods depending on the issues that arise. Feel that the communication about broad principles and how you share the training is vital.

**IF** asked how much control FC has over how RPA inspectors interpret advice.

**RHa** commented that trying to do some training with RPA so that inspections go better. Any case that we don't feel have been dealt with correctly we do feedback and look to overturn those decisions.

**RH** noted that for cull and effort forms and the quarterly payments we are trying to be more realistic about how they are requested. We are proposing to look at them in first one or two years of agreement and, as long as they are ok, then don't need to see again until year 5 and 10. Records would need to be kept but we wouldn't need to see them as often so again trying to make it more proportionate in terms of what is useful.

**JO** presented agroforestry slides

**GV** commented the plan seems focussed on when you have already made a decision rather than engaging on making a decision. Doesn't seem to be stepping back to a landscape scale.

**JO** responded that one of the purposes of the PA4 is to look at whether agroforestry is right for you. We have built it so it follows the course of actions if you are going to proceed but it is a legitimate way of exploring agroforestry.

**CTh** asked as the grant is triggered when you have an approved PA4. If you aren't going to proceed with agroforestry how do you claim the grant, how detailed does the plan need to be? Also asked to what extent can you use your PA4 as your CS application.

**JO** responded that this may need to be explored a bit further but if that is the intention then would need to set some parameters to work to. In terms of the second question, reviewing PA4 at the moment. In the form there is the field parcel sheet which acts as your compartment record with details of plans and hoping to adding a table which will have all the items and actions you can apply for, which won't be mandatory but will help with move into CS Higher Tier. Ideally would like to be able to lift the field parcel sheet and use that in CS Higher Tier application.

## **AOB**

**LA** talked about project looking at concerns raised about wild beavers affecting riparian planting outcomes. Trying to bring in more flexibility in terms of expected outcomes. Still working on final details of the policy but just wanted to advise that we have heard the concerns and are responding to it.

**AR** gave update on EPREC that was raised at the last meeting regarding the support offered to agreement holders following the hot, dry weather. In terms of the Nature for Climate programme and looking at the losses from planting last winter, we are working with Defra and are waiting for confirmation that funding is available. Unsure of details of support package but hoping for response in the next few weeks as conscious of time in terms of people having a chance to do replacement planting this winter.

**LH** asked if any evidence would be needed for eligibility.

**AR** responded that beat up assessments would probably be an evidence requirement but to be confirmed. Also commented that this is the second time we have run this and there is probably a question for us in terms of looking at the design of our grants to try and help applicants in terms of resilience.

**JH** confirmed next meeting would be online 13 November 2025

### Key Themes & Takeaways from today's meeting.

- Balance: Between accessibility and proportionate support to professionals.
- Language matters: more clarity in guidance, terminology and communication
- Outcome Based: move with technology and have flexibility

Meeting ended 15:00