

Ref: FCDAG 01/2026

DAG Minutes: 29/01/2026**Location:** Webinar/teleconference**Chair:** Jane Hull**Secretary:** Sarah Lawson**Attendees****DAG Members:**Jackie Dunne (Confor) **JD**Graham Garratt (ICF) **GG**Paul Orsi (Sylva) **PO**Graham Clark (CLA) **GC**Neville Elstone (ICF) **NE**James Russell (Community Forests) **JR**Luke Hemmings (NPFPG) **LH**John Deakin (National Trust) **JDe**Simon Marrington (Woodland Management Companies) **SM**Ian Froggatt (Woodland Trust) **IF**Greg Vickers (RFS) **GV**Andrew Weatherall (W&C LINK) **LB**John Bruce (Confor) **JB**Brian Fraser (HTA) **BF**David Lewis (RICS) **DL**Clive Thomas (Soil Association) **CT****FC/Defra:**Jane Hull (FC) **JH**Sarah Lawson (FC) **SL**Penny Oliver (FC) **POI**Lucy Greenberry (FC) **LG**Harry Joyce (FC) **HJ**Lisa Brooks (FC) **LB**Rebecca Isted (FC) **RI**Richard Hofman(FC) **RH**Rhianne Harris (FC) **RHa**Jim O'Neill (FC) **JO**Alec Rhodes (FC) **AR**Louise Alexander (FC) **LA****Apologies:**

Simon James (Small Woods)

Poppy Sherborne (NFU)

Claire Douglas (RPA)

DAG Minutes

Welcome

JH opened the session and welcomed all.

'State of the Nation'

People

- New Forestry Commission Chair
- New Forestry Commissioner Paul Brannan
- Welcome back Andrew Weatherall representing LINK at FCDAG
- Bruce Maguire is the new Head of Woodland Regulations at the Forestry Commission

Policy

- Environmental Improvement Plan – published 1st Dec 25
- Trees Action Plan expected later in 2026 and also Land Use Framework later in the Spring.

Practice:

- Blogs: 27th Nov 2025 – A co-ordinated effort: How we're tackling the dual threat of deer and grey squirrels (FC and NE in National Tree Week)
- Skills: Level 3 Craftsperson: Supplytrain to support businesses with Level 3 Craftsperson Apprenticeship (10th Feb webinar)
- Level 6 - New Development Woodland officer – the next round will be open on Civil Service Jobs from 2nd Feb- 1st March
- Tree Survival –15th Jan - Minister spoke in the House of Commons – a debate on. Protection and Management of Young Trees - Hansard - UK Parliament
- New National Forest -Oxford -Cambridge Corridor – seeking delivery partners, 12th -30th Jan opening.

Grants

- EWCO – Submit by 31st May to ensure agreement in place for the next planting season
- OPM Private Residents Scheme - closes 30th Jan

Previous minutes approved without amendment and action log reviewed.

LB noted the Trees Action Plan is expected later this year, but content is being condensed. The land use framework is expected to be published quite soon. Defra want to ensure that the strategic initiatives coming out all fit together in a holistic way.

Proposals for Grey Squirrel management videos

RI (Squirrel Policy Advisor, FC) presented slides.

DL raised the need for videos to clearly link to grant obligations, particularly the impact assessment, the cull effort and the monitoring and record keeping. **RI** will work with the FC grants team to ensure the videos support grant applicants and grant holders.

NE suggested integrating new content into existing training resources such as the Sylva Foundation materials, ICF training modules on UKFS. **RI** commented that these look at the principles of what you need to do. This is more focused on the how to, although noted it would be useful for people to be able to locate this from those resources.

GG commented there seems to be a loss of familiarity and expertise in the forestry sector regarding squirrel management. Many gamekeepers also struggling and seems to be variance in what woodland officers are expecting. **JH** commented that FC is working at the moment to bring support and consistency from our staff.

JB raised that guidance should contain advice for landowners on managing public concerns and perceptions. **JH** supported including an element around how the sector engages with the public.

JD emphasised need for clarity of obligations in the agreements. Also urged stronger linkage with organisations that support gamekeepers and red squirrel management groups. Need to work together to ensure best use of government money. **RI** confirmed in communication with red squirrel conservation groups and noted concerns regarding lack of clarity of obligations.

LH requested more information around species choices that might affect resilience to damage plus management interventions that might affect squirrel behaviour or those aiding squirrel management. Raised that keepers are often controlling squirrels at the same time as other duties. It would be good to bring some reality into how this is going to be carried out. **RI** agreed to include information regarding when to intervene and not just how. Noted need to make sure this works for key groups on the ground and that they can access them.

GC asked for more updates regarding the long-term solution and the fertility trials and asked whether this could be included in the video. **RI** commented although this is out of the scope for this project, noted the need for clearer, more visible updates for the sector.

RH confirmed we are working to make sure it is clear when best practice information does and doesn't pertain to grant requirements.

- [UKSA Fertility Control Webinar 2025 - YouTube](#)
- Species Management webinar: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2J8pF6c4dRA>
- Policy update on squirrels released following the meeting: [Grey squirrel policy statement - GOV.UK](#)

ELM Update

POI (Head of ELM, FC) and **RHa** (CS Incentives Team Manager, FC) presented slides.

JB asked for updates on SFI agroforestry actions. **POI** confirmed no new information yet. On previous offer low and very low density agroforestry on low sensitive land options had modest uptake.

IF asked whether uplands work is linked to Landscape Recovery projects. **POI** said it is separate, but overlaps that will be brought into consideration.

JDe raised problems where agroforestry and woodland creation collide on the same site and schemes cross over into both Agricultural EIA and Forestry EIA. **POI** agreed to follow up and asked for case examples.

Higher Tier

JD raised concerns that applicants cannot view Higher Tier online until species plans are submitted, limiting ability to prepare. **POI** suggested could raise with RPA to produce a 'how to' video for applicants so they know what to expect.

JD also raised that have clients who don't yet have completed woodland management plans being invited and some with completed plans who haven't been invited which is causing confusion. Also queried progress on rolling window for applications. **RHa** advised with the invites that this may be due to customers having expired Higher Tiers. **POI** noted comments and advised that the rolling window where on completion of plans applicants can enter into HT is still the future ambition.

GG raised an issue with recent case of invite going only to the RPA registered main contact, not the most appropriate person and leading to missed invitations and feels like a fundamental systematic failure. **POI** confirmed it has been flagged to RPA and following up on this.

NE suggested interacting in a more coordinated, impactful way by speaking to others more broadly. **POI** responded that there are lines of communication open with Defra. **LB**

confirmed that we are very conscious of concerns about how the system is operating. FC shares those concerns and these are being shared with Defra.

Value of Forest Biodiversity report

HJ (Economist, FC) presented slides.

NE asked why the value of water quality isn't included. **HJ** responded that other research covers water; this study isolated biodiversity to get useful values for economic analysis.

GG asked how demographic of respondents relate to national demographics. Asked how you test what people do against what they say and also do you have comparables with other land uses. **HJ** responded that annex contains details of the survey sample. It tried to remove bias of certain people with stronger environmental opinions. Opinions levelled out over the survey.

From chat

GV: Does the survey provide data on how people value woodlands compared to other services such as health, education, defence etc - or even home grown food vs imported food. If it doesn't then it feels like it isn't based on the realities of a struggling economy.

PO: What will the research and values be used for? **JH:** broadly this sort of evidence helps in advocating for woodland management actions in grants - why the public purse should be investing in such activity. Whenever funding is being allocated in Defra Business Cases need to be prepared with Economist inputs. Having these studies helps in their preparation. The research also helps to uncover value which may have traditionally not had a market, on our journey towards unlocking real cash for ecosystem services. **LB:** HMT judge all bids for gov funding by their strategic fit to government objectives at the time, and then by their benefit-cost ratios (BCRs). Quantifying the economic, environmental and social values associated with woodland creation and management feeds directly into improving our BCRs and supporting bids for further investment in trees and woodlands.

Nutrient neutrality & new guidance

HJ (Economist, FC) presented slides.

JR expressed concerns over flood risk management ineligibility and bundling stuff together which is going to undermine nature markets. Need to respect the distinction between services and people's interest in paying for different elements. Request to unpick this so can still support flood risk management additional contributions. **HJ**

acknowledged comments but advised that there are currently concerns over double funding issues, which would undermine the principles of nature markets. Hope in the future that can be more flexible in these issues.

IF asked whether having EWCO first prevents entering a nutrient neutrality contract. **HJ** confirmed because EWCO places a legal obligation to take land out of agricultural practice, the legal additionality requirement of nutrient neutrality would prevent you from doing this.

JB expressed concern for timber production and feeling that these schemes may steer landowners away from productive forestry. **HJ** responded that nutrient neutrality does not prevent productive planting as long it doesn't largely increase the nutrient loading impact on the watercourse.

JD noted increasing difficulty meeting eligibility of Woodland Carbon Code (WCC) additionality, especially when EWCO is involved. **HJ** noted with the tests it can be hard to meet eligibility but needs to be clear that the specific part of private finance has caused the sequestration of carbon. With EWCO, to meet the financial additionality rules, sometimes those additional contributions might have to be sacrificed. **LA** added that it is important to understand the additionality before putting in claims. Currently once had final claim, can't take back the additional contribution.

NE queried why additionality seems to be handled differently in the carbon code than in nutrient neutrality. **HJ** advised there are different rules – the nutrient neutrality is mitigation for developers whereas the WCC operates only in the voluntary carbon market. With nutrient neutrality, the EWCO payments won't impact financial additionality of taking land out of agricultural practice as it's a secondary action to entering the nutrient neutrality contract. EWCO interacts heavily with the financial additionality test in the WCC as it is part of the funding mechanism for woodland creation as well as the carbon.

AOB

JD (from chat): When is the Capital only grant likely to open in 2026. **POI**: we don't yet know when the stand alone capital grant will re-open in 2026. HT capital and all our other CS woodland offers like woodland tree health and infrastructure remain open all year round.

JH confirmed that the next meeting would take place 12th March in Birmingham.

Meeting ended 12:43