

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Trees and Woodlands Scientific Advisory Group (TaW-SAG)

Meeting 31 Minutes: 3 February 2026, 10:00 – 12:00

Attendees

Rob MacKenzie (RMK) – **[Chair]**, School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham; Birmingham Institute of Forest Research

Ruth Mitchell (RM) – Biodiversity and Ecosystems Group, James Hutton Institute

Keith Kirby (KK) – Department of Biology, University of Oxford

Paul Burgess (PB) – Sustainable Agriculture and Agroforestry, Cranfield University

John Healey (JH) – Professor of Forest Science, Bangor University

Stephen Cavers (SC) – Centre for Ecology and Hydrology

Maggie Roe (MR) – Newcastle University

Ian Bateman (IB) – University of Exeter

Julie Urquhart (JU) – University of Gloucestershire

Martin Lukac (ML) – University of Reading

Richard Buggs (RB) – **[Observer]**, Kew

Mike Morecroft (MM) – **[Observer]**, Natural England / University of Reading

Tony Hutchings (TH)- **[Observer]**, Forest Research

Defra:

Richard Chapman (RC); Stephen Nelson (SN); Iain Dummett (ID); Rebecca McIlhiney (RMI); Chris McGurk (CM); Alex Elsy (AE); Emma El-Deen Luke (EEDL); Emmeline Rogers (ER).

Also present: Mark Broadmeadow (MB) Forestry Commission; Sam Lattaway (SL) National Forest Company.

Apologies

Anjali Goswami (AG) – Chief Scientific Advisor, Defra

Bianca Ambros-Oji (BAO) – **[Observer]**, Chief Scientist, Forest Research

Daisy Ellis (DE) - Defra

Richard Bridge (RBr) - Defra

Item 1: Welcome and Introductions

RMK welcomed attendees and confirmed recording had started.
Apologies were noted.

RMK noted Anjali Goswami's attendance at IPBES and invited any feedback at a future meeting.

Item 2: Review Minutes from Previous Meeting

Minutes were agreed as a true and accurate record, subject to correction of chair attribution.
Actions reviewed:

- New R&D proposals – ongoing
- Forestry team structure – ongoing

RMK confirmed no outstanding actions requiring follow-up.

Item 3: Updates from Defra

Defra provided an update on current activity, noting increased parliamentary interest in trees and forestry and a continued focus on delivery priorities, including National Forests and land-use policy.

The Nature for Climate Fund programme is nearing completion and is broadly on track against its core target, though challenges remain for higher ambition scenarios. There is evidence of delays in planting decisions due to land tenure and uncertainty.

The Environmental Improvement Plan (published December 2025) includes actions on trees and forestry, including an interim canopy cover target. A new Tree Action Plan is in development, integrating tree health, resilience and forestry policy. TaW-SAG will support its development.

Work is also ongoing on a new programme business case to 2030, with scrutiny focusing on monitoring, evaluation and governance. Capacity pressures due to team changes were noted.

TaW-SAG raised concerns about the feasibility of long-term planting targets. Defra highlighted reliance on Landscape Recovery schemes and private finance, with woodland contributing to wider habitat targets.

The group noted Dan Doherty's significant contribution to the Trees and Forestry team, particularly over the course of the Nature for Climate Fund programme.

Action 1: Defra to engage TaW-SAG in testing and refining the Tree Action Plan (TAP) at a future meeting.

Item 4: Emerging Species Risk Assessment and Decision-Making

Forestry Commission (FC) introduced the emerging species risk assessment framework, designed to support species diversification while managing environmental risks.

TaW-SAG noted that while scientifically robust, the framework may be complex and should better reflect species–site interactions, prioritisation, and use of international evidence.

Concerns were raised regarding governance, transparency, and potential conflicts of interest. The importance of clear decision thresholds and precautionary principles was emphasised.

FC confirmed that:

- The framework includes site considerations and international evidence
- Risk assessments will be published
- Safeguards will be applied through management prescriptions
- Limited evidence will result in trial-only use

Further clarity on governance, transparency, and escalation processes is required. Pilot assessments will be shared with TaW-SAG.

Action 2: Defra to prepare a readout of the emerging species discussion for the CSA's office, reflecting key points on governance, transparency and decision-making.

Item 5: New National Forest Update and Advice

Defra provided an update on plans to deliver three new National Forests during this Parliament. One is underway, another identified, and a third is planned.

The spatial mapping approach combines environmental suitability and social demand to identify priority areas.

TaW-SAG highlighted:

- The importance of cultural landscape context and public acceptance
- Limitations of static mapping approaches
- The need for participatory and place-based approaches
- Opportunities for targeted local research

Defra invited further evidence and input from the group by email.

Item 6: Social Science Evidence Synthesis

Defra presented an evidence synthesis and invited feedback.

Item 7: Any Other Business

RMK noted recent commendable MSc work (Matt Watkins), brought to the group's attention, and confirmed that acknowledgement had been sent on behalf of TaW-SAG.