

Notes / Action Points From The Meeting of the Applicants Focus Group (AFG), Held at the National Motorcycle Museum, Birmingham 14th May 2009.

Present:

Richard Britton (FCE, chair), Andrew Smith (FCE), Craig Harrison (FCE), Mark Broadmeadow (FCE), Caroline Harrison (Confor), Richard Sochacki (Independant), Judith Webb (RFS), Neville Elstone (ICF), John Morris (SWA), Mike Seville (CLA), Nick Atkinson (Wildlife and Countryside Link), Steve Hunt (FCE), John Lockhart (RICS), Andrea Graham (NFU), Tim Shardlow (ICF), Julian Ohlson (UPM Tilhill),

Apologies:

John Blessington (LGA), Chris McGloin (Community Forests), Alison Mable (DEFRA), Tony House (RPA).

Item 1 Welcome and introductions:

Richard Britton welcomed everyone to the meeting, and asked all members to quickly introduce themselves, for the benefit of those new to the group. Richard gave a background to the introduction of the Briefing Note (Paper 01) into AFG business.

Richard asked for any AOB items – None forthcoming at this time

Minutes from last meeting were agreed.

Item 2 Matters arising from previous meeting (13th November 2008):

Action Point	Progress
Issue pending from previous minutes - Invite FCE Head of development to future meeting	Richard updated members on the current situation. Section now known as Policy and Programmes group. Laura Jones was successful in interview, and has now taken up post. Discussion ensued as to benefit of Laura attending. AFG consensus was that it would be beneficial, especially with regards background and update on issues such as Open Habitat, Wood Fuel, ETWF etc. <i>Action 1. Richard B. to discuss with Laura, identifying the interest shown from AFG. Consider attendance at November meeting.</i>
5/6. Issues relating to SBI and land registration.	Still seen as a major problem to the industry, and is acting as a barrier to FC engaging with owners. Some advisors are openly recommending owners disengage from pursuing grant aid for woodland work. Not clear whether the issues are with customer or land registration (or both). Issues

	<p>raised included non-arrival of basic forms following request, lack of communication during process, the level of bureaucracy involved for what are often small work areas (increasing the cost to the landowner) and lack of understanding of the processes at regional FC level. Andrew highlighted a couple of recent changes:</p> <p>FC now has access to the RPA National Database, so is able to query RLR registration issues, when raised. Currently this is through only a single point of access and as yet it is unclear how effective this may be.</p> <p>RPA has confirmed that only those areas being entered for grant aid need to be identified and registered, as opposed to all woodlands within that ownership.</p> <p>AFG members re-iterated the strength of feeling regarding these issues.</p> <p>Action 2. Andrew to review location of next AFG meeting (possibly Bristol), in an effort to encourage RPA to attend, so this issue can be discussed more fully.</p>
7. RDPE delivery	<p>Not clear how best practice is being shared at regional level, with some regions being much more effective than others. The minutes of the EFIP meetings may help in this respect and consideration should be given in distributing these further within the industry.</p> <p>Action 3. Caroline to ask Gesa (secretary for EFIP meetings) to review the distribution list for minutes for their meetings, with a view to distributing to a wider industry audience.</p>
8. Feedback on potential grant options and opportunities.	<p>Richard B. confirmed that there had been none in relation to these particular issues, but recognised the excellent feedback received, in a timely fashion, in relation to other issues.</p>

Item 2 Briefing Note (Paper 1)

The introduction of a briefing note was felt to be an excellent addition, and was fully supported by those present.

Action 4. Steve to incorporate the briefing note into future meeting schedules.

Hampton review.

Andrew elaborated further on the background to the Hampton review. New dates had been agreed. These had been identified as 1st – 3rd September, but would now all take place in Edinburgh. One of these days would be for stakeholders, and this would require AFG member involvement, which would mean seeking representatives from the north of the country if possible.

Action 5. Andrew to confirm date of the Hampton Review stakeholder meeting and to seek AFG representatives to attend.

EPS.

Members were concerned at the lack of engagement from NE, in relation to proposed field training for owners and agents and also apparent lack of understanding among NE staff at regional level regarding implementation of the Regulations. Members felt that there is the potential for addressing field based training issues through alternative options.

Action 6. Richard B. to take opportunities to raise the lack of engagement issue with senior NE staff, discussing handling of the issue with Laura Jones.

Action 7. Steve to investigate with RD's, using RFS regional meetings as a platform for undertaking some EPS field training. Also to consider opportunities for using industry based ecologists as a commercial option to NE staff.

There was full support from members regarding the standard approach at FC regional level with regards the use of the EPS check sheet.

Business Support Simplification Programme. (BSSP)

Query concerning who "we" were? Confirmed as FC and NE. Agreed that there was real progress being made in some regions regarding linking initiatives, through the Regional Development Authorities (RDA's).

Clarification was sought regarding the interface between Higher Level Scheme (HLS) and English Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS). This issue was deferred to AOB.

Terms and Conditions (T's and C's).

It was felt that there had been a lack in communicating changes in the past. This had been addressed in part by sending out an email alert this time. However this method of notification still had a limited circulation, despite FC encouraging owners and agents to sign up for this service. Further thought should be given to notifying the industry of any future changes. It should be made clearer just what the actual changes are, as these are not specifically identified and it proves almost impossible to compare older versions with the latest one.

Action 8. Craig to consider how best, current and future changes to the Terms and Conditions of EWGS, can be identified.

HARRPS.

Acronym is wrong. Should read HARPPS.

Changing Species. (Paper 1a and 1b)

Some of the detail in the shorter version was felt to have been lost, with the conclusions giving an incorrect message. Mark pointed out that this document was now 12 months old and will be reviewed and updated as time allows.

Action 9. Mark to provide link to "Changing Species" document.

Item 3 RDPE Delivery. (Papers 2, 3 and 4)

Craig outlined some of the key issues identified in the three most recent email alerts. He explained the reasons for introducing the WIG cost calculator, the most important being that it meant that the new standard costs and any future amendments, could be implemented sooner, as there would be no need for time consuming (and costly) GLOS development.

Concerns were raised regarding the 15th May deadline for WMG contracts. It was acknowledged that it was as a result of the EU wanting payments aligned to SPS claims, but didn't help woodland owners, most of whom wouldn't be SPS claimants anyway.

Concern was raised that the changes to the new planting rates in particular would have a major effect on the tree nursery business, with customers likely to cancel orders as a result of delaying planting to take advantage of the new, higher rates. The suggestion was made that new rates should be made available at time of claim, rather than set rigidly when the contract is signed. FC made it clear that contracts would not allow this flexibility and would breach the RDPE rules. It was accepted that this uncertainty was probably more of an issue in Scotland.

The RDPE identified a new planting target of 2,200 Ha per year, but actual planting had fallen just below this for the last two years. FC response was to increase the availability of Additional Contributions (AC's). Some uncertainty as to how AC's are paid (either in total with first instalment or as an 80/20 split as with planting grant).

Action 10. *Craig to confirm that AC's are paid in instalments, as per planting grant.*

Craig went on to explain the changes to the FWP rates, which had been established with the help of an agronomist. The NFU had sent out an alert to farmers about the changes. Any increases in SPS rates would not affect the level of FWP and when the latter ceased the owner would continue to receive SPS. The changes remain to be verified by the EU but FC was confident that this would not be an issue. Craig confirmed that there were two small groups of owner that needed to be contacted in order to discuss the effect that these changes would have. These include owners who are in contract, but where the planting had not yet taken place, and those where the planted area has/is been claimed as set aside.

Members suggested that there might be some benefit in targeting existing FWPS holders about the changes to SPS, as these are likely to be receptive to undertaking further planting. Further discussion followed, concerning raising the profile of the "good news" and increasing the interest in new planting, with suggestions as to where there may be gaps for the FC to target. It was acknowledged that most forestry agents were not necessarily well-versed in SPS issues and were not necessarily, therefore, the best to advise owners.

It was felt that well written articles, either by the FC or an independent agent, would be one of the best means of spreading good news stories. These

should be aimed at such journals as the NFU magazine and British Shooting and Conservation. This could be supplemented by targeting certain areas with a pro-active approach using either FC staff or independent agents on contract. Issues were raised concerning that latter with regards to unfair competition.

The recently launched bird WIG in East Midlands was identified as a great success, and was proving instrumental in “opening doors”. The approach was proving to work and could form the model for other initiatives.

Budget. (Paper 5)

Andrew gave a brief summary of his paper, which was self-explanatory.

He also gave a brief background to “Due Diligence” with regards to tree felling.

Item 4 CPET (Paper 6, 6a and 6b)

Steve briefly introduced his paper, updating members as to where the process was at present. FC is currently awaiting confirmation from DEFRA, that they are presenting a paper to Ministers shortly for approval. Concern was raised that at CPET sponsored road shows, “the category B” option was not being correctly explained. The message was clearly suggesting that only woodland certified under the UK woodland Assurance Scheme (UKWAS) would comply with the requirements of the new purchasing protocol. The relevant road show was some four months previous and it was felt that this message should have now changed to take account of the protocol that had been identified by the FC, which clearly meets the criteria set for legality and sustainability.

Action 11. Steve to contact Proforest to confirm that an earlier message requiring Category B timber to be fully certified, was no longer being promoted.

The Woodland Planning Grant (WPG) template had recently been the subject of a review process. This was required to ensure that the template met the current UKWAS standard. The template was reviewed by Proforest and the revised document was subject to peer review by Peter Wilson, which identified that some minor amendments were required. This work had now been completed and the final draft was in front of AFG members for any comment. There was broad agreement that the template was fit for purpose. Strong concerns were raised with regards the new costings section. Potentially sensitive information in this section would be available for the public to view. This information had not been previously necessary. There were concerns as to the level of detail that would be required, as it would be impossible to predict accurately what timber values and working costs would be in future years. The time burden to complete this section was also seen as an issue, increasing the cost of management to the owner.

The guidance note had also been revised to take account of any changes made to the template.

Action 12. *Steve to forward copies of the WPG guidance document out to AFG members, and to seek further guidance from Neil Judd (Proforest) as to the depth of information required for the costings section.*

Action 13. *AFG members to feedback any further comments on either the template or the Q & A paper to Steve by Friday 26th June.*

Item 5 Climate Change and Carbon. (Presentation and accompanying paper)

Mark highlighted the latest Operations Note 20 – “Co-funding of Woodland Creation Through EWGS and Carbon Finance”, and highlighted its purpose. Mark painted a background of many projects selling woodland carbon off-sets in the past being poorly thought through and creating some bad publicity. The rationale for UK projects (including forestry, renewable energy and low carbon transport) not being able to generate offset credits (under the terms of Kyoto compliant international carbon markets was outlined). A way forward was suggested in which domestic projects stated clearly that they were contributing to meeting national emissions reduction targets, rather than generating credits to be sold on carbon markets. This position would be compatible with co-funding through EWGS WCG. The possibility of guidance for such projects being incorporated into business reporting Guidelines was also discussed. The FC is currently writing a code of good practice, this is due out for public consultation, during the next month or two.

Action 14. *AFG members to send any written comments regarding the operations note to Mark by end of June.*

Climate Change Guidelines.

Three high level guidelines for the sector to work to:

- Forest management should contribute in the long term to the capture and storage of carbon.
- Build resilience into our forest and woodland resource.
- Help society adapt to the impacts of climate change.

The Guidelines introduce some 33 elements, which Mark briefly outlined. They will go out to public consultation over the summer, alongside the revised UKFS and other Guidelines in the series.

Action 15. *Steve to circulate Climate Change guideline document, or link, to AFG members for information.*

There had been a review of the G & R function in the context of climate change. This identified that the current grants package, was compatible, and had enough flexibility to allow changes to be made in order to meet the challenges ahead. The key challenge was to hone our policy options, some of which may require future ERDP approval.

Timetable for the current scoping study is:

End of May 2009

Finalise scoping study – produce internal draft for comments.

July 2009	Paper to be presented to the FC Executive Board (EB).
November 2009	Revised paper to be presented to the next AFG.
Phase II 2010	Full analysis of recommended measures published.
2011	Implementation.

Item 6 AOB

One item identified during the meeting was discussed. This related to lack of clarity between NE's HLS scheme and EWGS. The case of a 60 Ha SSSI woodland, shortly going into an HLS agreement was raised. FC highlighted that there had been an intentional overlap between the schemes to ensure that there would be no gaps. The intention was that the schemes would mutually compliment each other and neither should be seen as a threat to the other. Members highlighted that there was a distinct lack of understanding regarding woodland management amongst NE field staff, and poor knowledge of EWGS.

Action 16. Craig to discuss issues concerning the relationship between HLS and EWGS with John Lockhart.

Date of next meeting – Thursday 12th November 2009. Location to be agreed.

Meeting closed.