

Woodland Creation Grant (WCG) Round 2011

Purpose

The following paper represents initial thoughts from a small group of Forestry Commission Grants & Regulations Managers and key aspects, particularly the 'Priorities' section, still require to be 'proofed' against the Emerging Policy Framework.

To brief AFG members on these initial thoughts about changes to the operation of Woodland Creation Grant and seek their feedback on those ideas.

Introduction

To date, EWGS WCG has attracted applications to get close to our Corporate and RDPE woodland creation targets. It has been reasonably successful but there are some issues:

- Struggling to get application demand to meet national targets
- Uncertainty for applicants whether they'll be accepted or not; fear from applicants that they may be wasting effort
- Complaints about excessive complexity – seen as a barrier
- Scoring system hasn't been required with most regions accepting all schemes
- Additional Contributions (AC) inconsistent between regions
- Variation in complexity, methodology of targeting, scoring
- Complexity of Additional Contributions between and within regions
- Numerous documents – national guidance EWGS 1/7 guide, regional guidance, WCG form, EWGS 1 form, score form
- Staff costs to administer the grant
- Inflexible species requirements
- Need to better encourage more complex schemes that may have long gestation period (e.g. large, brownfield, or involving land purchase).

Key aims for WCG changes

In response to the 2010 WCG round and feedback from applicants, we are considering ways to improve the grant mechanism. Key aims are:

- Consider a mechanism that doesn't involve application windows
- A simpler mechanism for eligibility/targeting Yet allows applicants to know if they are likely to be offered grant or not (subject to budget availability of course)
- A mechanism that still ensures delivery of public benefits and provides a means for us to say no to "low value" applications
- Simpler, more consistent use of Additional Contributions across the country
- Remove direct linkage with the England Forestry Strategy and ETWF; instead focus on current core delivery aims (will need to policy-proof what these are with PPG colleagues)

- Increase flexibility of woodland design/species choice to meet climate change / adaptation demands
- For 2011, should involve little if any GLOS changes (so no changes to base WCG rate but ACs can be changed)
- Simplification or removal of regional targeting grant mechanism (and/or consideration of mechanism for Big Society input)
- Considering a shift in application onus/burden from applicant to WO? Need to check consistency with RDR requirements and current approvals procedures i.e. avoid WO 'agent' approving own scheme.
- Consider options / ideas for post 2011 (up to RDPE end which may involve GLOS/EU changes, and broader thoughts beyond RDPE).

Ideas for 2011

Eligibility

Largely thought to be OK, though we debated whether we should stop funding woodland creation where it is a planning requirement e.g. S106 agreement. Perhaps we would only fund such schemes if it meant we secured sufficient additional public benefits? Worthy of further discussion

Targeting & Payment Rates

We recommend a "First come first served" approach to WCG, where we accept suitable schemes up to the grant budget available

Woodland creation that meets the UK Forestry Standard and FC guidelines would always deliver some public benefits e.g. biodiversity, landscape, resource protection, carbon storage. To meet UKFS the proposed woodland would have to be on a suitable site, contain species suited to the site, be designed with open space, species, planting design and shrubs that ensure it delivers these generic public benefits. Therefore the base level woodland creation we would accept is where it meets UKFS

In addition, payment rates would be simplified with either:

- Base rate WCG (£1800 Broadleaves £1200 Conifer £700 Special Broadleaves)
- Higher rate using £2000 Additional Contribution (£3800 BL, £3200 CON)

Priorities – subject to emerging policy framework

We recommend scrapping the scoring system and replace it with clear criteria for woodlands that we would accept, based on:

- Woodland location
- Type of woodland being planted
- Access provision

So, payment rates / targeting would be as follows:

	Priority Area	Outside Priority Area
Priority woodland	WCG + £2k AC	WCG + £2k AC
Other woodland	WCG + £2k AC	WCG
Public access woodland	Any of the above with access costs paid via WIG/WMG	

Priority areas and woodland types need to be determined but we envisage:

- Native Woodland, particularly linked to other woodland or semi natural habitat
- Quality of Place (or other similar indicator near people / deprivation indices)
- Ecosystem Services (Soil & Water resource protection)
- Brownfield restoration
- Carbon storage / productive potential

Woodland Design / standards

We recommend:

- The insistence on 100% Native BL is relaxed to meet climate change / adaptation policies. We recommend allowing max 20% non native species but this needs to fit with the Ancient and Native Woodland Practice Guidelines
- Increase provenance awareness while still allowing flexibility to meet climate change / adaptation policies
- Consider removing the 30 metre minimum width rule

Conclusions

Using the above recommendations, we think the key principles are met including simplification and transparency

We fully expect Woodland Officers to apply their technical expertise to ensure the appropriate woodland design is employed. By removing the complexity of varied scoring and ACs, this should release Woodland Officers to do more proactive work. This would be the key method of regional targeting – by proactively approaching landowners in our priority areas

Recommendation **AFG members are invited to comment on the issues and ideas raised in this paper**