

# APPLICANTS' FOCUS GROUP MEETING

## National Motorcycle Museum, Birmingham

### 17th May 2012

#### 1 Welcome, Introduction & Apologies

Present: Andrew Smith (FC) Mike Render (FC), Kevin May (FC), Julian Ohlsen (UPM & South West AFG), Tim Shardlow (ICF), John Morris (Small woods Association), Matthew Willetts (on behalf of John Lockhart), John Blessington (LGA), Caroline Harrison (Confor), Chris McGloin (Community Forests), Steve Hunt (FC), Mike Seville (CLA), Neville Elstone (ICF), Nick Grant, Kirk Fosbrooke (RPA Scheme Management Unit), Richard Sochacki, Mike Wood (RSPB & W&CL), Andy Goodsir (FC), Nigel Hobday (FC).

Apologies: Judith Webb (RFS), Andrea Graham (NFU), Gesa Reiss (EWTP), Simon Mageean (Wildlife and Countryside Link), Claire Robinson (NFU), Poppy Saunders (FC)

#### 2 New Actions from this meeting

AP	Action
1	<b>Kevin May and Steve Hunt</b> to communicate the interim solution for Management Plans to the sector as soon as possible.
2	<b>Kevin May</b> to consider a process for approving Woodland Management Plans that are drawn up outside of the grant aiding process and to communicate this to staff and the sector as soon as possible.
3	<b>Kevin May</b> to draft a paper on the transitional arrangements for grant aid, especially in connection to the need for Woodland Management Plans and to make the sector aware .
4	<b>Steve Hunt</b> to draft a paper identifying the current process for selecting cases for inspection based on risk.
5	<b>AFG Members</b> to provide feedback on the current suite of Eforms.
6	<b>Steve Hunt</b> to distribute the Eforms presentation and link to test site.
7	<b>Kevin May</b> to arrange for full grant guidance to be issued to the sector prior to the 28 <sup>th</sup> May release date for WCG, so they are best equipped to advise owners.
8	<b>Andrew Smith</b> to discuss with Mark Broadmeadow whether newly created woodlands would be eligible for future carbon funding.
9	<b>Kevin May</b> to discuss promotion of the new WCG rates with the FC comms team in order to ensure effective targeting of the grant. This would need to be undertaken as soon as possible due to limited timescale available to make the most of the grant available.
10	<b>AFG Members</b> to identify attendees for the RDPE stakeholder meeting (June

	12 <sup>th</sup> ) and encourage attendance. Interested parties to contact Mike Render.
11	

## Actions from previous meeting

Members noted actions from November meeting. No issues raised. Management Plans, especially those linked to Woodfuel WIG identified as a key issue that had been outstanding for some time.

Woodland Plans were accepted as a sound foundation for woodland Management and would be the support mechanism for future grant aid.

Having considered the issues, FC was proposing an interim solution, on the understanding that a final solution was the role of the Woodland Management Planning work group due to be established shortly (led by Kevin May). The following was agreed:

Plans would be accepted on a landscape scale. This might be the entire woodland holding of an owner, or it may be an individual block within an area if this is appropriate.

FC would not accept applications for grant aid for planning, where woods were artificially split or where there were several woods within the same landscape unit and the owner wished to work in only one or two of them. As a compromise however we would accept a plan for a single woodland for woodfuel WIG, provided the plan was completed **to the same standard as the current FC template** and that the owner agrees to have the plan drawn up **without the benefit of FC grant aid**.

It was agreed that an owner may apply for a plan for their overall woodland holding, but in order to apply for a short term woodfuel grant, submit an interim plan for an individual woodland provided this fully met the requirements. The area associated with this would be included in establishing the value of the overall plan.

Members agreed that this was an excellent interim solution which would encourage work whilst allowing the working group met to discuss and agree a process and templates for the future.

**Action 1**                      **Kevin May and Steve Hunt**

**Action 2**                      **Kevin May**

Andrew Smith clarified the transitional arrangements whilst we transfer to the new RDPE.

**Action 3**                      **Kevin May**

## Briefing Note [\(paper 01/12\)](#)

Time being short following lengthy discussions on Management Plans, and their being no questions, the briefing note was passed and we moved to next agenda item.

### 3 Actions and Update on Forestry Regulation Task Force Background: ([paper 02/12](#) and [appendix](#))

Andrew Smith referred to the table attached as an appendix. This highlighted the key actions to be worked on and those staff, or dept responsible for completion. Big challenge due to the number of recommendations (some 40 in number).

3 key areas seen as the most relevant to the AFG:

- Earned Recognition
- Woodland Planning and
- Grants

Paper identified possible options for taking this forward.

- Small working groups led by FC – co-opting members from AFG to work with the individual groups
- FC work groups that then arranged ad hoc meetings around the countryside to seek views of the sector

A third option was suggested by members,

- 2 sub groups of AFG (looking at Management Plans and Earned Recognition), with members co-opted from FC to assist. The work of these groups to be fed back through the main AFG in order to seek views of those members not able to directly support the work groups.

Discussion followed as to the appropriate approach and the issues involved. It was made clear by FC that if the third option was followed, the AFG would have to organise, chair and take responsibility for the decisions made. Further discussion ensued with possible alternatives.

FC was prepared to accept the third proposal or possible compromise (one working group looking at Woodland Planning and Earned recognition), but there would need to be important caveats, which included FC agreeing minimum standards and timescales. If agreed, this would be a major project for AFG to take forward, and one which would be both time and staff 'hungry'. FC would not have the staff resource available to service the working groups. Following considerable further discussion it was agreed that non FC members of the AFG would meet during the lunch break to discuss the issues and agree a way forward.

The issue of grants under the new RDPE was discussed and it was agreed that the current process, with a stakeholder meeting scheduled for June 12<sup>th</sup> was appropriate. AFG members considered setting up a 'shadow group' that would discuss issues and feed in to the process as a group, rather than as individuals.

Members discussed the issue of Earned Recognition. It was acknowledged that Woodland Officers already exercised an unofficial process based on local knowledge which was appropriate and effective. Minister's however had tasked the FC to come up with a formal process of Earned Recognition. There were various views expressed and it was agreed that this should be left to the working group, in whatever format it was agreed to

take, to review. It was acknowledged that there were probably some quick wins that could be agreed such as changes to felling approvals, that would be more effective than a formal Earned Recognition process.

#### **Action 4**                      **Steve Hunt**

RPA noted that woodland work was relatively low risk and that a paper was currently being considered from EU that suggested a target inspection rate of 3% (current target is 5%), for work that was seen as low risk, FC work would lend itself to this, but final agreement was some way off.

There was some discussion as to whether woodland management should work to the UKFS or to UKWAS. Overwhelming view was that the UKFS was the most appropriate route for owners to follow.

## **4 Introduction of Eforms** [\(PowerPoint\)](#)

Andy Goodsir gave a brief overview of the Eforms project.

Current work programme was aimed at helping the customer. The initial set of forms, the EWGS suite of forms 1-7, claim form and amendment, plus the Felling Licence application and Agent Authority form. The work was aimed as an alternative to paper forms, but FC encouraged applicants (mainly agents) to make use of the Ebusiness option where possible (direct input into GLOS).

The EWGS forms would be replaced by a single form with on / off facilities depending on the grants being requested, with a number of basic enhancements such as postcode search and some essential validation functionality.

Andy outlined the basic process, how it might be saved, passed between the owner and agent, and how it would ultimately be sent to the appropriate admin hub.

Forms had the ability for attachments in any format (digital, PDF, Word etc.)

Initial feedback from members included:

- FC must ensure that forms are located on most logical web-pages
- There must be a good search facility as current facility was not fit for purpose
- Forms should allow for direct transfer into GLOS (confirmed by FC as a future aspiration)
- One AFG member reflected that customers only really wanted a word document that could be completed online and emailed easily.

Acknowledged these points. Andrew Smith explained that there were constraints as to why the option for turning documents into MS 'Word' was not taken. Key to these was the fact that under the new RDPE, it was likely that future applications would have to be made on line from 2015, so FC was using this exercise as a valuable learning experience.

Andy requested feedback on the forms, any other thoughts and priorities for the next forms to be considered.

**Action 5**                      **AFG**

**Action 6**                      **Steve Hunt**

Forms would be launched during June.

## **5 Plant Health Update** ([paper 03/12](#) and [paper 03a/12](#))

Deferred to AOB due to time constraints

## **6 Members Feedback on Task Force Working Groups**

Following further discussions AFG members confirmed their preferred approach to the working group issue. This was:

- Two working groups would be convened, led by and organised by the FC. Each group would include appropriate members drawn from the AFG.
- Working groups would review Woodland Management Plans and Earned Recognition
- It was agreed that the current process for the grants stream would continue with AFG members attending the event on the 12<sup>th</sup> June, and subsequent events, as appropriate.

## **7 Woodland Creation Grant** ([paper 04/12](#))

Kevin May introduced his paper, highlighting the key points, which reflected the future agenda identified in the current RDPE work and existing Rural Development White paper.

The proposed improvements were very welcomed by group members, who saw them as one of the best opportunities ever, to encourage new planting. Agents would need a clear steer as to 'business rules'.

**Action 7**                      **Kevin May**

Discussion covered a number of issues.

Enhanced rates covered both newly established and existing woodland;

Reference was made to woods created under bulletin 112. It was made clear that sector should work to the most recent Ancient and Native Woodland guidance as this was far less restrictive, especially in relation to species choice;

FWP payments. In order to be guaranteed payment, WCG had to be claimed by 31<sup>st</sup> December 2013. Failure to claim by this time would result in loss of FWP entitlement;

All FWP payments once triggered would be honoured for the contract period;

Budget was not seen as a constraint – this was more likely to be down to limitations in sector capacity to complete the works;

Removal of scoring process should result in more woodland 'types' being eligible for the higher grant rates, provided they met the requirements of the UKFS.

Grants would be allocated on first come first served principle, no priority would be given to any individual theme at present.

New woodland that meets the Water Framework requirements were identified as a key priority. This is because future funding is most likely to be available in this area of work, and for the first time ever the Environment Agency recognises the importance of woodland. The sector should take advantage of this.

Kevin demonstrated initial versions of maps highlighting the key priorities – Priority Places for People (PPE), Water Frameworks Directive (WFD) and Nature Improvement Areas (NIA's). Members requested that final maps be at a greater scale to ensure that possible cases can be identified as being within the designated areas, rather than leaving owners disappointed. There would be some Woodland Officer discretion when confirming sites in or near target areas.

**Action 7**                      **Andrew Smith**

**Action 8**                      **Kevin May**

## **8 RDPE Grants** ([paper 5/12](#) and [appendices - paper 05a/12, paper 05b/12](#))

Mike Render introduced his paper. Confirmed that Defra wished to see HLS and EWGS grant schemes merged into one. Both FC and NE were working to introduce scheme by the start of the next RDPE (2014).

FC were holding a number of stakeholder meetings which would allow the sector to feed into the future shape of any grant package.

Defra are seeking contributions from agencies which were aimed at providing evidence for the need to support stewardship work under the new RDPE.

Concerns were raised among the members that economic issues would take priority over bio-diversity – currently 70% of the available funding is aimed at stewardship work.

The work that FC was embarking on would not be easy as initially this would have to be done without any clear steer from the Independent Panel Review, which was due to report on the 4<sup>th</sup> July.

Mike ran through the key points for discussion, which needed to be considered by AFG members prior to the first FC workshop on the 12<sup>th</sup> June. Points discussed included:

FC Wales and Scotland had benefited from closer integration;

Budget availability and possible competition for limited funds;

Market forces were key, if demand for timber was high and prices right, woodland management would result. It was essential to promote a healthy supply chain.

WMG had been a blunt tool that some saw as being misused. This funding should be redirected to improve Woodland Planning;

Defra recently announced work to review possibility of single IT system for RPA, Natural England and FC.

Members agreed that Market Pull (healthy supply chain), Woodland Management and Training and Advice were key areas to concentrate efforts on. There were opportunities to learn from what we have done previously and to be more radical in our future approach.

**Action 10**                      **AFG Members**

## 9 AOB

### Digital Ordnance Survey Maps

Conflicting advice from WO's in relation to availability of digital mapping. This is available and can be submitted, but data handling was very complex and required suitable software and a reasonable knowledge of GIS. Best results had been achieved with larger companies which retained a dedicated GIS resource.

### Agent Authority Form

Concerns were raised at the manner in which changes were introduced to the Agent Authority form. Andrew acknowledged this and accepted that this could have been handled better. It was suggested that the FC used AFG members as a sounding board before making sudden changes to processes. This would be taken on board. It was accepted that this form has been around for a long time and that the need to impose stricter control and make changes to the form was as a result of staff and agents not following the requirements.

## 10 Date of Next Meeting

Thursday, 15<sup>th</sup> November 2012, at the National Motorcycle Museum.

There was some discussion as to whether we should hold an interim meeting. It was felt that with all the working group activity going on that this would be enough.