

APPLICANTS' FOCUS GROUP MEETING

National Motorcycle Museum, Birmingham

15th November 2012

1 Welcome, Introduction & Apologies

Present: Andrew Smith, Kevin May, Poppy Saunders, Nigel Hobday, Stephanie Rhodes, Rob Gazzard, Steve Hunt (FC), Andrew Woods (RFS), Gesa Reiss (EWTP), Caroline Harrison (Confor), Chris McGloin (Community Forests), John Morris (Small woods Association), Mike Wood (RSPB & W&CL), Julian Ohlsen (UPM & South West AFG), Neville Elstone (ICF), Simon Mageean (Wildlife and Countryside Link), Kirk Fosbrooke (RPA), Tim Shardlow (ICF), John Lockhart (RICS) and Ann Evans (NFU)

Apologies: Richard Sochacki (ICF) Claire Robinson (NFU), Mike Seville (CLA), Nick Grant (RPA), John Blessington (LGA), Mike Render and Joe Watts (FC)

Andrew welcomed all to the meeting, especially Andrew Woods. A quick round the table for the benefit of new attendees. Andrew explained a new approach to the meeting that he wished to try and hoped all would follow:

- Have formal presentation,
- Take all questions and answer in a managed fashion,
- If time permitted allow a second round of questions.

John Lockhart had raised a list of questions prior to the meeting. FC had responded to all questions and copied responses to all members. This had been well received and agreed that this was an excellent way to cover a variety of issues in future. Further questions were raised and it was agreed to cover these outside of the meeting.

Action 1 AFG Members

2 New Actions from this meeting

AP	Action
1	AFG members to submit any relevant questions to Steve Hunt, at least three weeks prior to meeting date. Steve to co-ordinate responses and send out with meeting papers.
2	Mike Wood to raise issue over compensatory planting with Steve Hunt
3	Poppy Saunders to feed thoughts and concerns from the AFG back to Dominic Driver in relation to the Independent Panel review.
4	Poppy Saunders to seek clarity from Dominic Driver re the future of the National Forestry Stakeholder Forum.
5	AFG Members to raise any issues and concerns with regards Earned

	Recognition and forward these to either Nigel Hobday to co-ordinate responses and feeding in to the ER working group meetings, or through their industry representatives (Caroline Harrison, Mike Seville, Julian Ohlsen or John Lockhart).
6	Nigel Hobday to advise the AFG of proposals as a result of the next ER working group meeting, so that members can provide feed back.
7	Nigel Hobday to circulate copies of the previous ER meeting notes to AFG members as soon as possible, for information.
8	Steve Hunt to distribute names of those members external to FC that sit on the various working groups, so that members are able to pass their views / issues on.
9	Poppy Saunders to make enquiries as to when Forestry would be removed from the Gangmasters Licensing legislation and advise AFG members accordingly.
10	AFG Members to provide feedback to Rob Gazzard on the Wildfire presentation.
11	Steve Hunt to distribute a list of admin staff and dates due to be leaving the FC so that customers can express their thanks directly to the individuals they have regular contact with. Please see covering email.
12	Poppy Saunders to provide links for information identifying further Plant Health threats that are lurking around GB's borders. See below: http://www.forestry.gov.uk/readreport http://www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/INFD-5STC8A#treehealth http://www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/INFD-7XRFX9
13	AFG Members to provide feed back to Poppy Saunders in the event that grant administration appears to be delayed as a result of Chalara management.

3 Minutes

Minutes form last meeting were accepted.

4 Actions from Previous Meeting and Briefing Note [\(paper 06/12\)](#)

Actions from last meeting were self – explanatory. No key issues raised as a result of the briefing paper, apart from one relating to compensatory planting as a result of habitat restoration.

Action 2 *Mike Wood*

5 Stakeholder Engagement / Response to Independent Panel Report:

Response was on track for January – there had been no delay as a result of the recent Plant Health work linked to Chalara. It was too early to say what response might be, but all items identified were still on the table. It was likely that recent plant health issues would mean that Ministers would highlight Plant Health as a priority, although no guarantee that this would result in an increase in funding or staff resource. Members raised concerns that there was a real danger of Plant Health crushing the opportunities,

in what was a very positive report for the industry. It was important to integrate Plant Health alongside everything else. FC was alive to the aspirations of the industry and would grasp as many opportunities as was feasible within the available funding. Concerns were raised that further limits on funding would stifle opportunities even further.

Action 3 **Poppy Saunders**

Members were reminded that Plant Health was not covered by the Independent Panel and therefore may be viewed positively. The Secretary of State had indicated that there would be a new approach to Plant Health, although not clear whether this meant new funding or a re-profiling of existing resource. Members were reminded that their feedback would be much more powerful if it was directed at those involved in the reporting process.

It was acknowledged that there had been some criticism of the grant process. Some MP's had reacted adversely, mainly as a result of over zealous WCG aspirations in certain parts of the country. There were certainly no plans identified to drop grants as a tool at present, but we needed to note the lessons learnt from market mechanisms and the carbon code.

It seems likely that the Government's response to the panel report will indicate future direction of Government policy.

Action 4 **Poppy Saunders.**

6 Task Force Report Update

41 points accepted by Government to take forward. The three key areas remained as:

- Earned Recognition (ER)
- Management Planning
- Future RDPE

Final report was still on course for end of March. Members were made aware of current position on ER. The other two areas would be covered later in the main agenda.

Interim (6 month) report had been sent to Defra. This would not be placed in the public domain although would be available within the various forestry user groups.

There was a general discussion among members with regards the relative merits of ER. Concerns were raised on a number of issues. All would like to see ER result in a simpler approach to managing grant and regulation applications, but doubts were raised that this would be possible. Concerns that ER required a much higher level of technical competence (as with similar approach with Natural England) and may well lead to more complexity. It was generally felt that the current informal approach to ER, where WO's used local knowledge to steer site visits /inspections etc. was preferred. Members were reminded that FC had been tasked to review, but that we recognised the risks that members were eluding to. The current informal process was not carried out consistently across the country and this would need to be reviewed so that the process was equal and transparent for all. FC National office would give thoughts as to how best to achieve this.

Action 5 **AFG Members**

Action 6 **Nigel Hobday**

Action 7 **Nigel Hobday**

Action 8 **Steve Hunt**

Forestry was due to be removed from Gangmasters Licensing, but members were not aware of when this was scheduled to take place.

Action 9 **Poppy Saunders**

7 Management Planning ([Paper 8/12 & PowerPoint](#))

Kevin May ran through a presentation highlighting the direction of travel on Management Planning:

- GIS to support standard suite of information. This should ideally be based on the Rural Land Register (RLR), although accepting that alternative map bases might be used.
- Base level plan which proves sustainability and legality (and provides felling permissions).
- Higher level plan which ensures access to grants.
- Simple record of compartment details, which may be populated from existing records.
- Simple template approach that can be built up depending on size and complexity of woodland, ease of completion.

Kevin acknowledged that the biggest challenges will be IT compatibility and single point for entry of data. Members felt that the general approach was sound, with a lower level of plan allowing estate's to get early felling approval, simply, was welcomed

8 RDPE Update ([Paper 9/12](#))

Future Options Programme: New CAP system that would support all future payments across all delivery partners. Andrew highlighted the FC's involvement with the work and highlighted a chart which identified main steps and timing of delivering the single IT support system:

- Approval process will continue to run until end of 2012.
- Procurement work has already started and is identified for completion by the end of 2013.
- Development on the system is due to start middle of 2013.

There will be a staged approach to release, delivering:

- A single registration process (customer and land) by the beginning of 2014.
- Basic Payment Scheme (currently SPS) to start paying by mid 2015.
- Pillar II payments (stewardship) to commence payments late 2015.
- Possible migration of legacy schemes in 2016.

RDPE Development and Timing:

High level consultation was due to commence early 2013, aimed at establishing key priorities. This would look at detailed product design.

Current indications are that, due to delays in the EU budget approval process, the start of the new delivery programme will be January 2015.

In the meantime FC is planning to continue delivering grants through GLOS (under the N+2 rule). Truly integrated grants would not be available until the start of the new delivery programme. FC has yet to agree interim arrangements with Defra and these may still require further consideration if there is more slippage in the EU budget process.

Single CAP system:

Will provide key customer benefits:

- Single system covering all grants, ensuring easier cross checking etc.
- Single processes – Customer registration, Land registration (on RLR) and application all one exercise.
- Digital by default – (recommendation of Forestry Regulation Task Force (FRTF) – ebusiness) driving down transaction costs.
- 'Assisted Digital' – enables customers to access the system where communications are poor.
- Single / simple requests for information – reduces the number of times partners have to contact the applicant.
- Single view of customer – joined up working and easier resolution of issues.

Some concerns were raised among members in relation to Defra's commitment to a single system and threats to a 'seamless transition' between the old and new RDP's as identified by FRTF. Also concerns over cross border issues where approaches were fundamentally different. FC urged to prevent delays as experienced in Scotland – continued use of GLOS would hopefully reduce the risk of this happening.

9 Wildfire Presentation ([PowerPoint](#))

Rob Gazzard gave the background to this project. The intention of the presentation to AFG was to raise the profile of the project and to seek feedback on any issues for the industry. Industry wide consultation is planned for early 2013. As many organisations as possible would be included in this process. The intention is to produce a UK wide fire management plan.

The PowerPoint presentation would be distributed to members at the same time as the draft minutes.

Key challenge was ensuring that the information was disseminated out to foresters on the ground. FC would need to consider the wider communication issues.

Action 10 **AFG members**

10 Admin Hub Changes.

Background:

Poppy reminded members of the challenge to meet the 25% reduction under the previous spending review, without adversely affecting customers. The numbers of regions had been reduced from 8 down to 5 areas. FC was currently reviewing the level of admin support to customers. Admin hubs were designed to give built in resilience that would allow teams to support other areas of work. September 2012 saw a change in line management with the admin hub teams now being supported through National Office. This aimed to deliver consistency of approach across the country. Implementation of the hub model had resulted in the loss of some highly skilled staff, although a transition period would ensure that skilled admin staff would be retained up until December 2013. Members expressed their gratitude towards FC admin staff, as they were often the first point of contact and had always demonstrated a high level of knowledge and keenness to assist.

Action 11 **Steve Hunt**

Current areas being worked on are:

- Sharing of files
- Remote working
- Electronic storage.

Impacts on Customers:

- National Office now working very closely with admin teams to ensure a consistency in approach.
- Transitional resource will ensure that change from old to new ways of working are as smooth as possible. Skilled staff are transferring knowledge to new staff.
- FC acknowledged that there was a need to identify who within the teams were responsible for defined areas of work, so that customers had contact names to approach direct.
- To improve use of electronic transactions, further training is currently underway for agents and this would continue.
- Legacy (old Farm woodland schemes) would continue to be processed in just two area offices – South east and South west – but staff would be trained over the full suit of grants in order to avoid 'siloeing'.
- Fewer, more resilient teams would protect woodland owners interests during the grant integration process.

11 Grant Update

Confirmed that in (current) year funding still available for WCG, WPG WRG (related to Plant Health issues) and wood fuel WIG.

All funds were available for the 13 / 14 payment year.

Kevin highlighted the current position in relation to RDPE transitional arrangements

12 Plant Health

In last twelve months four new threats had been identified affecting the UK's woodlands and trees:

- Chestnut Blight – currently only infected nut crops identified
- Asian Longhorn Beetle – likely that small outbreak has been within UK for 5-6 years
- Chalara – infected new planting stock but also in the natural environment (2-3 years)
- Oak Processionary Moth – one individual site for possibly five years.

Action 12 *Poppy Saunders*

Andrew proceeded to give background to the most recent Chalara outbreak, details of the rapid survey that had been undertaken and showed members the latest map of disease outbreaks, both on new planting sites and the natural environment. Scientific report confirmed that the disease had entered through infected new planting stock and wind blown spores.

Currently 3 working groups were in place, looking at different elements of Chalara infection:

- **Plant Health task Force** – Looking at future approach to overall tree and plant health issues.
- **Chalara GB core group of stakeholders (includes some AFG members)** – looking at overall Chalara strategy.
- **Silvicultural Practitioners Group** Looking at practical details of woodland management and disseminating this out to woodland owners.

The FC's National Chalara Management Team works on the overall management of the disease both on FC and privately managed woodland and is informed by the three groups above.

Key approaches to disease control are:

- Reduce the rate of disease spread to reduce the impact on the industry and biodiversity.
- Promote natural resistance within the native ash population.
- Encourage engagement from members of the public as well as woodland owners and the forestry industry.

Some discussion ensued as to the merits of banning the movement of ash. Currently this was aimed at planting stock and seeds. Banning timber movements was likely to have minimal effect on the spread of the disease but could be hugely damaging to the timber industry. It is accepted that the disease is now within the natural environment, and that best efforts would be achieved by slowing the spread of the disease, allowing time to develop resistant seed sources and lessening the impact on the environment. Defra strategy would be published by the end of November.

FC website remained the primary source of up to date information.

Concerns were raised as to the continuing effect that Chalara surveying and management may have on day to day grant administration.

Action 13 **AFG Members**

13 AOB ([Paper 7/12](#) & [10/12](#))

Operations Note:

Kevin May confirmed that Operations Note 29 could be freely distributed as it was in the public domain. Further copies were available if members required them on the day.

Other questions:

Several other questions were tabled on the day. Kevin May would take these away and respond as soon as possible.

14 Date of Next Meeting

Wednesday, 15th May 2013, at the National Motorcycle Museum.