

APPLICANTS' FOCUS GROUP MEETING

National Motorcycle Museum, Birmingham

13th November 2013

1. Welcome, Introduction & Apologies

Present: Kevin May (Forestry Commission (FC)), Joe Watts (FC), Mike Render (FC), Alec Rhodes (FC), Richard Britton (FC), Bruce Rothnie (FC), Caroline Harrison (Confor), Chris McGloin (Community Forests), Julian Ohlsen (UPM and SW-AFG), Neville Elstone (Institute of Chartered Foresters), Tim Shardlow (ICF), Matthew Willetts (on behalf of John Lockhart), John Blessington (Local Government Association), Gary Bartell (Small Woods Association), Richard Sochacki (ConFor), Andrew Woods (Royal Forestry Society), Rob Green (Natural England), Andrew Sharkey (Woodland Trust), Bradley Bates (Defra) and Mike Seville (Country Land and Business Association).

Apologies: Emma Friend (Defra), Chris Reid (NE), Nick Grant (Rural Payments Agency), Jon Frampton (RPA), Nick Phillips (RSPB and Wildlife & Countryside Link), John Lockhart (Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors), Gesa Reiss (England Woods and Timber Partnership).

Joe Watts welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced Alec Rhodes as the secretary.

3. New Actions from this meeting

AP	Action
1	AFG members to notify local FC offices of any applications held up due to RLR mapping.
2	Alec Rhodes to confirm the arrangements for applicants signing maps and confirm the FC's position on sub-compartment mapping.
3	Alec Rhodes to look again at the definitions paper in light of AFG comments.
4	FC to confirm if Woodfuel WIG applications can be submitted at the same time as the management plans to short-cut lead in time?
5	FC to clarify the FC and Ngage Solutions/contractor roles nationally.
6	FC to clarify the availability of support for public access provision.
7	FC to make FC workload priorities available publically.
8	FC to confirm the Standard costs group's current position.
9	FC to share slides with proposed woodland options with AFG members to provide comments on the proposals to Mike Render by 29th November 2013.
10	Mike Seville to send FC information to circulate with minutes of the AFG meeting.

4. Review of minutes and actions from previous meeting

Review of minutes from previous meeting:

- Andrew Woods requested a correction to his name.
- AFG members confirmed the minutes as amended.
- AFG members agreed to the principle of publishing a draft version of the minutes on the FC web site which would then be confirmed at the following meeting.

Follow-up actions:

AP 9: Members of the AFG expressed continued concern at the time taken to register land on the Rural Land Register (RLR) and frustration that the resolution of land registration issues with RPA lay with applicants and delayed applications processing. Kevin confirmed FC has a means of escalating problems with RPA and asked AFG members to ensure any hold-ups were raised with the local FC office.

Action: AFG members to notify local FC offices of any applications held up due to RLR mapping.

AP10: There was still confusion as to when applicants must sign application maps and concern that the current levels of FC mapping do not identify the precise location of felling within a sub-compartment.

Action: Alec Rhodes to confirm the arrangements for applicants signing maps and confirm the FC's position on sub-compartment mapping.

5. Briefing Note

AFG members asked why the Woodfuel WIG figures were in red. The red text highlights the fact this budget is ring-fenced (FC have some scope to adjust the other budgets, i.e., switch across different grant types).

Mike Seville explained his involvement in a review of Natura 2000 guidance and agreed to circulate a copy of the latest guidance to AFG members.

The proposals under the Red Tape Challenge led to the following comments:

- The power of entry is a useful deterrent and removing them may be short sighted.
- If the exemption of the need for thinning licences with a UKFS approved management plan meant no more "child case" grant agreements this was a positive step.

AFG members thanked ConFor for their work in taking forward revision to the Gangmasters Licensing Act and how it relates to forestry work.

AFG members asked that the scope of the tree and woodland definitions a paper was clarified. For example, EWGS applies a minimum width of 30 metres for woodland, the paper 20 metres. Will 0.5 hectares be the minimum size for woodland supported under

the new grant programme? The influence of grazing on tree height is not addressed and trees of special interest where not referred to.

Action: Alec Rhodes to look again at the definitions paper in light of AFG comments.

Steve was thanked for the aid memoire of GLOS cases statuses.

6. Woodland Management Plans

Kevin set the context for developing new Woodland Management Plans (WMP) and introduced the suite of products:

- Small Woodland Management Plan – This will be particularly suitable for woodlands under 10 hectares in size and aims to provide a simple plan to help manage such woodlands and obtain felling permission. Preparation of this plan would not be supported with grant aid.
- Woodland Management Plan – Available for all woodland areas. For woodlands over 10ha completion of the woodland management plan will support access to the new RDP grant support. Completion of the FC template is likely to be supported by a planning grant under the new programme for woodlands 3ha and over under the same ownership.
- Plan of Operations – Applies to all size of woodland and gathers information on felling and restocking to support licence and grant applications.
- Mapping functionality – It is challenging to enable the creation of WMP maps that can be used for grant applications, i.e., carry up-to-date RLR and Ordnance Survey MasterMap back drops and paper maps can move out of date. However, Kevin explained the move to CAP-IT will establish a single mapping standard. We are also working with the Sylva Foundation to provide some basic mapping functionality to support management planning.
- [Operational Site Assessment](#) – A discretionary form developed to help remind practitioners involved with forest operations of the relevant good practice and legislation that may apply to their operations.

The minimum size threshold for entry into the new RDPE is still to be agreed. Areas less than 10 hectares may still require a simple plan to access RDPE but this is still to be confirmed. Other formats of woodland management plan will be accepted if then meet the FC's UKFS checklist. It is proposed that grant support for planning would require the use of the FC template to reduce handling costs.

AFG feedback was that:

- A checklist is needed to ensure consistency in setting approvals across England.
- Consistent mapping requirements are needed.
- It seemed fair that planning grants were linked to the use of the FC template.
- If the plan required too much information it would make the plan harder to amend.
- While UKWAS was not part of the FC's approval criteria earned recognition this provided should not be forgotten.

Kevin summarised feedback from the pilot of the WMP products:

- IT compatibility - do FC develop a plan for the lowest common denominator at the expense of helpful functionality? To address this FC propose to create two versions of the template.
- The presentation of the nine UKFS requirements that relate to management planning was useful prompt (but repetitive for those producing many plans). AFG feedback was that overall this was useful.
- The exclusion of economics from the WMP was questioned but AFG members believed any requirement to include detailed economics in the WMP was excessive.
- The risk matrix was well received though a minority had found it complicated to use.
- The Plan of Operations needs to allow for the inclusion of sub-compartment and component information. While information can be broken down to a component level in the spreadsheet FC systems and mapping is limited to the sub-compt. level.
- The need to list the number of stems should be removed.
- Greater clarity was needed on the "consultation" section of the management plan to clarify the roles of FC and land manager.

The new WMP products will be launched at a series of ICF-led events running from January to March 2014.

The AFG asked how FC will store and use the information the woodland management plans will provide. Kevin confirmed it was the FC's intention to log plans and collate information and ideally this would be achieved by land manager's creating their plans online rather than on paper. Development of a web-based management plan is underway but this beyond the scope of the current work.

The AFG also asked if the template would accommodate more complex mixed woodland and those managed under continuous cover silvicultural regimes. While the Inventory and Plan of Operations spreadsheet's can accommodate information at down to the component level FC systems and mapping is limited to the sub-compartment level.

Kevin closed this agenda item by thanking those involved in development of the products to-date.

7. RDPE Transition and Workloads

RDPE Transition

The FC is working on the assumption that EWGS will still be open under transitional arrangements in 2014 but final confirmation of the transitional arrangements is still required from the EU. The FC highlighted the following points of the transitional arrangements:

- There are currently no plans to accept Woodland Creation Grant (WCG) applications in 2014. Current WCG applications must be approved by 31st December 2013 and FC have now closed to further WCG applications. There is ~2,900 hectares in the pipeline for planting 2014.
 - AFG expressed strong concern at the closure of WCG in 2014. This was a bad message for the forestry sector and gave no confidence to nurseries preparing home-grown stock. AFG members advocated the approach adopted in Scotland: where state aided planning grants have been extended to woodland creation to help prospective applicants work up proposals and obtain any regulatory consents in advance of the new scheme opening for applications. This would give nurseries clarity on upcoming demand. ConFor and CLA confirmed their intention to pursue this approach in England. Other AFG members indicated land managers would be willing to apply for WCG even if there was no guarantee of funding in 2014.
- Woodland Management Grant for bio-diversity objectives, Woodland Assessment Grant, Woodland Planning Grant Woodland Improvement Grant and Woodland Regeneration Grant remain open.
- Woodfuel Woodland Improvement Grant (WFWIG): The FC is currently planning for applications to continue into 2014, but to guarantee funding, current applications must be approved before the 31st December 2013. AFG asked if WFWIG applications can be submitted at the same time as the management plans to short-cut lead in time and the responsibility for processing applications for this grant type could be clarified.

Action: FC to confirm if Woodfuel WIG applications can be submitted at the same time as the management plans to short-cut lead in time?

Action: FC to clarify the FC and Ngage Solutions/contractor roles nationally.

FC was asked to provide clarity on support for public access provision so that applications can be submitted now if necessary.

Action: FC to clarify the availability of support for public access provision.

Finally, the AFG said that the FC customer liaison in explaining cut-off dates had been good.

Workloads

Kevin explain there had been a 90% increase in EWGS applications across England and set out some of the challenges the FC faced in processing this number of grant applications promptly. Felling licence applications have remained steady.

Despite the number of applications FC was still meeting charter times though AFG members where concerned that applications were being passed back to applicants due to RLR problems (see the briefing section) and as a result the situation was worse than it appeared.

Kevin explained field staff had been given clear guidance on priorities to help them manage the workload. Richard Britton explained FC had 76 delivery staff, of which 43 where Woodland Officers and assured the group that none were undertaking unnecessary work.

Action: FC to make FC workload priorities publically available.

8. Rural Development Programme Consultation

Environmental Land Management Scheme

Kevin and Mike presented the current proposals for the forestry options under the new rural development programme's "New Environment Land Management Scheme (NELMS)".

Principles

The new options must: deliver policy, be simple, verifiable, cost-effective, economically and sustainable. Targeting would be required delivered through a single CAP-IT system. Up to 15% of Pillar 1 funding could be moved to Pillar 2 through Modulation. At the moment 1% would needed to cover the existing commitments.

Ground rules

- A Management Plan will be required for areas over the minimum area that will be eligible for the scheme. The threshold has not yet been set but will need to ensure the majority of woodlands are eligible.
- Schemes must be compliant with UKFS requirements and guidelines to ensure Sustainable Forest Management.

- Grants will be targeted and awarded on a competitive basis to ensure limited funds deliver maximum benefits.
- Grant agreements and payments must result in durable outcomes.
- The new scheme should help delivery the Bio-diversity 2020 Strategy and the Water Framework Directive.
- It must address “deadweight” – when surveyed many of the recipients of woodland management grant aid claimed they would have done the work any way with out grant support.
- Large-scale conifer afforestation will not be supported. DEFRA explained that the role of the grant scheme was to enable Government intervention where the market could not intervene. The AFG raised strong concern about this: its impact on processing sector and how this would affect long-term softwood production in conjunction with a decline in conifers through conversion to broadleaves. FC noted this concern and AFG members’ intention to question this decision with Government.

Grants

Proposed options to support forestry where discussed. The proposed grant options are:

- Woodland Management Planning
- Woodland Improvement Grant
- Woodland Expansion
- Woodland Infrastructure
- Other options may cover wood pasture, the establishment of scrub and management of veteran trees.

The aims of protecting woodland and increasing resilient will be embodied in these options, but the AFG felt that while improvement and expansion were referred to **protection** should be clearer in the options since it is the top priority for England’s woodlands.

Woodland Management Planning (WMP) Grant

Woodlands over three hectares would qualify for grant to support creation of a WMP. This will need to follow the FC template. A WMP will be necessary for woodlands over 10 hectares to obtain RPDE funding (Natural England will require a plan on a consistent basis for other NELMS options).

The AFG expressed broad support for this grant type to continue and that a similar degree of grant aid was appropriate.

Woodland Improvement Grant (WIG)

There will be two elements to this grant option:

- 1) **WIG Commitments: Multi-annual payments** which would be made to compensate land managers for the additional costs of work (defined in the WMP) they would under take to achieve an outcome over a period of time. Payments would be made over a five year period at a suggested rate of £100 per hectare per year. Examples of

might include works, in combination or alone, to support priority species, bringing priority habitats (broadleaved woodland) into target condition, restoration of ancient woodland sites under plantation and restructuring woodlands.

The AFG thought the approach for this grant was complicated and would make it difficult to demonstrate what has been paid for - capital payments would be much easier. There was support for using standard costs to justify multi-annual payments and using these to assess what was delivered. However, FC cautioned that the potential to simplify the scheme was constrained by the rules: the payments must result in change.

The AFG were concerned that the themes of NELMS - water, resilience and bio-diversity – needed to be represented in the outcomes to support grant aid. In particular outcomes that support the Water Framework Directive should be a priority and strong justification for Woodland Improvement support. The AFG noted that meeting aspiration for water would need considerable resources but that forestry could help deliver these and that this should be used as a lever to make funding available. Due to the importance of the water agenda it was suggested “water” required a stronger voice and representation in the AFG.

The AFG asked if uneconomic thinning would qualify for support. FC advised that this may be possible if the outcomes would be delivered, e. g., a re-structured woodland. However, the income from any such operation would need to be deducted from the grant payment.

Some members of the AFG saw potential for this grant option to be simplified by focusing on deer and squirrel control because this would deliver the outcomes sought. However, there was concern at making payments on this basis for individual woods because effective control needed a collaborative approach across wider land holdings. Other AFG members felt eligibility for a range of wider purposes was likely to engage a wider range of woodland managers, but still saw the proposed approach as too complex.

The AFG questioned how the outcome of such grant payment would be measured and felt this must be made clear, .e.g., is it deer populations, features, % of PAWS restored etc. Exclosure plots and fixed point photos were considered useful means to assess change. The AFG questioned the implications of not achieving the desired outcome in the required timescale. FC advised that if some positive progress towards the desired outcome was evident and the contributing activity was evidenced this may validate the payment of grant even if the full outcome had not yet been achieved.

The potential to support the work in high value sites such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) due to regulatory requirements to protect them was discussed. AFG felt that the targeting of grant aid should recognise the value of such sites and that this should help address the risk that such sites receive lower maintenance payments. Overall the AFG felt that the approach to targeting/scoring needed further clarification, e.g., area vs. quality: would delivering more and score higher than an important site?

A question was raised as to whether the level of mapping possible on the grant system has sufficient resolution to identify where grant options might apply within a sub-compartment and the lack of multi-annual support for access and recreation was noted.

2) **Woodland Improvement Investments: Payments** to support one-off capital investments with physical or durable outcomes. These outcomes should prevent, restore or improve woodland in terms of natural disasters, pests and diseases and environmental or climate change aspects. Where restoring after damage the damage must have resulted in 20% loss to forest potential– though this has not yet been defined. This could be used in combination with multi-annual payment or on its own and would cover up to 100% of the standard costs – single rate.

There are presently 140 standard costs at the moment. These include fencing but the standard costs for the labour have been removed.

Action: FC to confirm the Standard costs group's current position.

Discussion about this element of the Woodland Improvement option focused on access provision. Support of this is anticipated to be available only where there is existing access through other grant options. Changes may mean that support through the LEADER programme is available in urban areas. The AFG drew attention to the absence of items to support grey squirrel control.

Woodland Regeneration Grant

Restocking is considered an operational cost (required to meet the regulatory requirements of felling licence conditions) and is therefore not eligible for grant support under the Rural Development Regulation. However, the proposal is to support regeneration for:

1. Restocking after plant health felling – there remain no legal conditions to replant after plant health related tree clearance, though the Environmental Impact Assessment regulations apply in the case of a change of land use.
2. Restocking after clear felling to restore PAWS.

And possibly:

3. Restocking with a range of species beyond the minimum diversity required to comply with UKFS.

WRG could be paid at a single rate applicable circumstances but this would not include natural regeneration but this would not include natural regeneration. However, there may be potential to provide support to protect natural regeneration through capital payments for fencing under Woodland Improvement grant.

The AFG saw WRG as a simple grant which is easy to monitor and which serves to bring neglected woodland into management. It can help support clearfelling to achieve a positive change to species or silviculture. AFG considered the move away from supporting like-for-like restocking to be a significant change from the current position and one of great concern which would undermine the benefits set out above and may lead to an over reliance on natural regeneration which could ultimately lead to managers withdrawing from silviculture and lead to poor final crops.

The AFG suggested eligibility for WRG should follow the Protect > Improve > Expand priorities and that payments should be made available for restocking which went above the minimum UKFS requirements or good practice, for example more than 1,100 stems per hectare. Also, eligibility for WRG should consider more than the actual restocking but also the outcomes that it generated such as bio-diversity and water protection.

The AFG asked if the capital Woodland Improvement grant could be used to support restocking if more than 20% of the forest potential was lost. FC advice was that the WRG, justified on plant health grounds, would be used in such a situation.

A further observation the AFG made was that the carbon task force had found the requirement to replant and permanently retain land as woodland served to discourage land owners from planting. In the interests of promoting more woodland a more flexible approach to land use change from forestry should be considered.

Woodland Infrastructure

The provisions to support forest roading under the current Woodfuel WIG (WFWIG) is proposed to be carried forward as this grant can improve potential for economic management. The WMP would need to identify a need for such infrastructure and payments would be made at either 40 or 60% of actual costs subject to State aid rules. Work associated with EIA would not be funded: there is no future grant proposed that would be equivalent to the current Woodland Assessment Grant. However, some provision could be made to help with the preparatory work under WPG as long this did not cover the work required to comply with the legal EIA requirements - like WRG this would be an operational cost ineligible for grant aid.

The AFG saw real benefit in this grant type to ensure provision was made to secure the long-term management of woodland. However, the FC's current road specifications were excessive, especially if support would be capped at 40% of the costs, and this would lead to a decline in take-up. The AFG questioned the need for actual costs and the number of quotations needed – the three required under the current WFWIG was considered excessive. The need to mobilise a minimum volume of timber in certain timeframe was also considered a short-sighted criterion of the current WFWIG given the long-term benefits infra-structure could provide.

Woodland Expansion

This option would support the capital and maintenance costs of establishing new woodland.

Only 80% of standard costs would be paid to allow for carbon finance and the payments would be based on the stocking density and area rather than just area. The capital payments would pay for the planting stock, planting and the protection. Natural colonisation is not eligible. Maintenance payments will be made over 10 years at a flat rate of £200 per hectare.

The increase in maintenance payments in the uplands was noted. Beyond this the AFG commented that current cross-compliance requirements undermined woodland creation and that the specification must set a minimum spacing for tree planting.

The AFG were concerned about the timescales for engaging their wider group members and providing feedback, (given the deadline for scheme submission is February 2014) and asked for copies of the slides.

Action: FC to share slides with proposed woodland options with AFG members to provide comments on the proposals to Mike Render by 29th November 2013.

Farming and Forestry Productivity Scheme

The possible provisions of the Farming and Forestry Productivity Scheme were not discussed at the meeting.

11. AOB

***Phytophthora ramorum* strategy**

A review of the *Phytophthora ramorum* strategy must be high priority for the FC given its implications on the grant options.

Warfarin

Mike Seville briefed the AFG on the current situation with the UK's Warfarin licence. Warfarin is currently certified for use in the UK until the end of July 2016 with applications for the re-licensing to this date had to be submitted by the end of July 2013. However the £0.5M fee charged for the re-licensing process meant that Killgerm, the current UK licence holder, did not apply and as a result the current licence will be terminated on 31 March 2014. After this date Warfarin will no longer be licensed in the UK.

Action: Mike Seville to send FC information to circulate with minutes of the AFG meeting.

Chalara trace forward

Richard Sochacki questioned why the location of sites Chalara trace-forward sites were not made clear as agent and land owners were drawn into considerable work in helping to pin point the location of the planting stock.

Woodland Regulations - Applications Forms

The draft felling licence application forms require stronger statements on the presumption against felling without restocking.

12. Date of Next Meeting

15th May 2014 at the National Motorcycle Museum, Birmingham.

13th November 2014 at the National Motorcycle Museum, Birmingham.

DRAFT