

Notes / Action Points From The Meeting of the Applicants Focus Group (AFG), Held at the National Motorcycle Museum, Birmingham 13th November 2008.

Present:

Richard Britton (FCE, chair), Andrew Smith (FCE), Craig Harrison (FCE), Michael Graham (FCE), Caroline Harrison (Confor), Richard Sochacki (Independant), Judith Webb (RFS), Neville Elstone (ICF), John Morris (SWA), Mike Seville (CLA), Chris McGloin (Community Forests), John Blessington (LGA's), Simon Mageean (Wildlife and Countryside Link), Steve Hunt (FCE), Hugh Williams (FR)

Apologies:

John Lockhart (RICS), Mike Wood (RSPB), Andrea Graham (NFU), Tim Shardlow (ICF), and Ian Barrett (Defra)

Item 1 Welcome and introductions

Richard welcomed all to the meeting and briefly ran through the agenda for the day.

Item 2 Matters arising from previous meeting (30th October 2007): (Paper 5)

Minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

The issue of acronyms was raised again, and it was agreed that a list of these would be added to the web site, and new ones added to it as they are identified.

Action 1. Steve to compile list and ensure new acronyms are added from each meeting. Arrange to be placed on the AFG pages.

Action Point	Progress
Issue pending from previous minutes - Invite FCE Head of development to future meeting	This section of FCE is now known as Policy and Programmes Group. The senior post is currently being trawled internally and externally to the FC, with a known outcome probably in February. <i>Action 2. Invite new appointee to 2009 meeting</i>
1. AFG Members to feed any further comments on the ETWF policy paper back to Programme group members as soon as possible.	A Ministerial re-shuffle had resulted in the publication of the paper being held up. The process needed to be kick started again with the new Forestry Minister, Huw Irranca-Davies. This would now delay publication by some months. Regional events between FC and Natural England had been held despite this setback, in order to maintain momentum. (Paper 6)
2. Future EPS training events	To be covered in main agenda.
3&4. Publication of SLIM and Organic Woodlands Papers.	FC is not aware that either of these has been published to date. Richard highlighted the new Government procurement policy for timber, set for introduction in April 2009. Policy will demand all Government Departments, Agencies and Non-Departmental Public Bodies to source all timber and timber products from independently verifiable legal and sustainable sources, or to be

	FLEGT licensed. This will also apply to other public bodies, such as local authorities, which have voluntarily adopted the policy. The Central Point on Expertise of Timber (CPET) provides advice and guidance to public sector buyers and their suppliers. CPET web site (www.proforest.net/cpet) provides further information. FC is currently working towards the facilitation of the "Category B" evidence route, which will meet the necessary criteria and be of interest to small woodland owners. It is likely that this will result in the FC updating the UKFS. Members were very interested in this option and were supportive of a "beefing up" of the UKFS, if this meant an easier route other than full certification. Government procurement contracts have pages of conditions, so any new policy must be easy to understand.
5. Support for CCF through current grants	To be covered in main agenda.
6. RDPE Programme Monitoring Committee (PMC)	Link provided for group members to access. (www.defra.gov.uk/rural/rdpe/committee.htm .) This gives the background to the group, those organisations represented, and has links to agendas and minutes of meetings.
7. Electronic management of E business within GLOS	FCE is currently drawing up a strategy for this. Current E-business pilot that involved some agents would feed into this process. Intention is to visit Wales where E-business accounts for 100% of application management in order to see what works, what doesn't. FCE looking to a target of some 40% of electronic applications in future, using "key" customers.
8,9 and 10 Paying agency update	To be covered in main agenda.
11 and 12. Research issues	To be covered in the Forest Research presentation.
13. Improving future training opportunities with limited resources	Part covered on agenda. Opportunity to make use of RFS and SWA resources, as well as ICF.
14. Use of EU regional funding to assist with the cost of training events	Rural Development Agencies (RDAs) are not necessarily all taking the same view of risks, in the interpretation of eligible activities for Axis 1 support. This means that each would have to be approached separately to discuss opportunities. RDAs would need to consider a broader forestry project, with possible training as an element of this. Members identified that East England, South west and the North east were the RDAs most likely to be sympathetic to approaches.
15. Briefing note for future meeting	Richard suggested that production of this may not be possible until the national Grants and Regulations resilience plan is fully implemented.

Item 3 Paying agency update (Paper 7)

AFG actions, FWP and set-aside changes

Some concerns were raised as to why any rate should come down at a time the FC were struggling to meet the RDPE target for WCG of 2,200 hectares per year, noting that rates on poorer quality land appear to be increasing. Andrew acknowledged that this years WCG round was below the target figure, but reminded members that this was an average for the programme period, and he highlighted new initiatives for next year's round, such as the rollout of "additional contributions" to all regions, that should help encourage further planting. AFG members were reminded that an

outcome of Sustaining England's Woodlands review was to shift the grant funding balance towards support for existing woodlands' stewardship. Priorities in ETWF effectively consolidated this policy.

Andrew reviewed the table of rates and this raised a number of discussion points.

Key issues were:

- Danger that planting shifts to land types we don't want to encourage (especially with demand on food production on the most fertile sites);
- Appears to be steering people away from planting "productive" woodland;
- Need to consider the management of schemes already approved at a higher FWP rate for next year's planting.

Action 3. AFG members to feed back any further thoughts to Andrew by 19th December .

Action 4. National Office to consider contacting Andrea Graham and Alan Buckley (CLA economist).

SBI registration

Andrew had drafted a response to a queries from Caroline regarding SBI. FC confirmed it could be published in ConFor's magazine.

Action 5. Andrew to distribute SBI response to other AFG members for information.

RPA had "soft pedalled" for 2008 in relation to owners declaring all woodland on their SP 5 return. It is likely that they will enforce the requirement for 2009. It was clarified that this would only be a one off issue, with future SP 5's being pre-populated with the woodland data in subsequent years.

Feedback suggested that some owners had found the SBI process a painful experience, especially in relation to time scales and lack of complete information from RPA.

Action 6. John Morris to provide specific cases to Andrew so that these can be taken up with RPA.

Item 4 RDPE Delivery.

Axis 1/3 Leader programme

FC highlighted a paper containing responses to Parliamentary questions around aspects of Axis 1, 3 and 4 delivery to date. This provided a useful insight into how the RDPE across these axes was working. Richard highlighted several good forestry examples, some where significant funding had been secured e.g. East England where £4 million had been secured for the woodfuel project. He also identified two large Leader projects, one for £32 million in the South east, and one for £29 million in the South west, where woodland based projects could potentially tap into new funding streams. A recent example was the launch on the 12th November of the Chilterns Leader programme.

The impression of members was that although there were a number of applications being received by RDAs, it appeared that not many were getting approved. Concern was raised as to why this should be. Following discussion it was agreed that there was an urgent need for more information being made available, especially from applicants who had been successful, so that the industry as a whole could gain

maximum benefit. It was felt that the “England Forest Industries Partnership” (EFIP), would be a good vehicle to help distribute the message regarding best practice.

Action 7. Richard B. to raise this issue with the partnership chair, Simon Hodgson.

Business Support Simplification Programme update.

This is a pan-government initiative, led by the Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR), to simplify access to business support by small businesses in particular. BERR’s interest extends to RDPE delivery, with FC and natural England being engaged in the process as it affects Axis 2 schemes. Defra is currently seeking ‘branding exception status’ for EWGS and Environmental Stewardship grants and advisory services to avoid confusion for customers. FC and NE will be required to work more closely with Business Links in future over sign-posting support for businesses, though the details were still being clarified.

EWGS Update. (Paper 8)

Andrew introduced the paper. Concerns were raised that much woodland planted today will never be truly “productive”, and there was a danger that this extra funding would produce more of the same. Similarly members felt that broader support should be given to the management of eco-systems rather than restrict funding to say just butterfly management. FC felt that this was already happening as demonstrated by work being undertaken for water catchment, flood protection/prevention, water quality and soil protection.

Action 8. AFG members to consider potential grant options/opportunities and forward any thoughts to Andrew Smith by 19th December.

Item 6 Research Advice and Information

Red Band Needle Blight (RBNB)update

Hugh gave an update on this disease. Red band Needle Blight was first identified in GB in 1954. It is now found in England, Scotland and Wales. He confirmed that we have a wide variation in the causal agent (a fungus, *Dothistroma*). This gives the disease “hybrid vigour”. This, combined with a series of warm moist summers, mild winters and reduction in harvesting/thinning have meant that levels of disease infection and mortality have increased rapidly in recent years. The *Pinus* genus is particularly affected. In extreme cases the disease can result in death of the infected tree, but any event can result in loss of productivity, with a significant relationship between the level of attack and loss of production.

Initially restricted to Corsican pine (CP), the disease has now been found on lodgepole pine (LP) in Scotland and Wales. There are also reports of infection on Scots pine (SP) although the number of incidents is, at present, low. Other conifer species and genus may be susceptible. RBNB is a European wide issue with many countries affected to varying degrees. The disease is affecting a large proportion of the SP forests in Finland.

Chemical treatment is impossible, due in part to the wide genotype variation, although use of copper fungicide is being tested under nursery conditions. Research work to help alleviate the damage caused, is therefore being concentrated on choice of species and stand manipulation (i.e thinning regimes).

Hugh gave a summary of the current work that is being undertaken to monitor the spread and effects of the disease as well as the formation of a GB programme board and two working groups. The working groups are focussed on the North of England and Scotland (looking mainly at LP) and the South of England and Wales (looking

mainly at CP). FC is also taking actions - the FC moratorium on CP planting would remain in place and a similar action was being considered for LP. Hugh confirmed that there were still many questions to be answered, and warned that the disease could potentially have a major impact on the future of forestry. There was a wide discussion on many issues. Forest Research was urged to undertake tests on SP, as this had often been seen as an alternative to planting CP.

Andrew reminded members of the current position regarding grant aiding pine planting. This position was queried, as to whether it is right to commit public money to planting a species or species' that are not likely to survive. This could turn into a "bad news" story for the industry if it became known. This position would be one of the first issues to be reviewed by the new FC Programme Board. The issue of productive woodland was again raised, and the FC was urged to ensure that premature felling, as a result of infection, was not seen as an opportunity for expanding open habitats, or PAWS restoration (on sites that were never woodlands previously!), resulting in a loss of productive woodland.

The point was made that there was a lack of reference to plant health, especially with regards potential threats and dangers, in any current or future strategies. This must not be forgotten as it has the ability to trip us up in achieving identified, desirable results.

The latest Research Information note on RBNB can be found at:

[http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/pdf/fcrn002.pdf/\\$FILE/fcrn002.pdf](http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/pdf/fcrn002.pdf/$FILE/fcrn002.pdf)

Forest Research has a very good Questions and Answers paper on the web site. Go to:

<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/INFD-7L6E57>

Forest Research Structure and Communications

Hugh gave an update, highlighting recent changes. Clearer understanding of its priorities, the ability to seek opportunities for further research and additional funding opportunities were paramount to Forest Research (FR) continuing to provide an effective service for its customers, and maintaining its enviable position as a world leader in forest research issues.

Concerns were raised that FR had a tendency to produce and communicate on its own, rather than as part of the industry as a whole. It was accepted that FR needed to review its approach in this respect. Key to its success was communicating to the industry, and there would be increased effort in respect of improving its website, updating external publications, having articles published in trade journals and a revamp of the newsletter.

One service that was well received is the series of field days that FR organises annually, with set themes. These now had a very good reputation within the industry and were always well supported. The support that the forest sector gives to Forest Research (for example, access to sites, information sharing/feedback, partnership funding) was acknowledged and welcomed.

Continuous Cover Forestry (CCF) Update (Paper 9)

Craig introduced his paper. There was an acceptance that different regions had developed their own methods of dealing with CCF management within the current EWGS. The purpose of the paper was to explain how the current system of grants

could be utilised to support this management, whilst ensuring a consistent approach across England.

A lively discussion followed and the main points raised were.

- Lack of understanding of CCF
- Fundamentally flawed proposals as CCF is not area based
- Recruitment into the woodland canopy is pivotal, not regeneration
- Natural regeneration time-scales may be longer than normal grant support periods
- Despite best management planning, it isn't entirely predictable e.g. natural regeneration
- No comments on proposals for support under WIG & WMG
- Concern about lack of CCF management skills within the sector
- Lack of fit between CCF and EWGS grants
- Look at Better Woodlands for Wales (BWW) which was designed to support CCF
- That the discussion highlighted the complexities of CCF communication

Action 9. Craig to review paper in light of comments made and update as appropriate. Steve to forward updated paper to individual AFG members.

Action 10. AFG members to circulate updated paper to a limited number of society/institute members for further comments. Responses to be fed back to Craig by 19th December.

Ancient & Native Woodland Guide Consultation

Richard gave an update as to the consultation process. In all, there had been 60 written communications, with some 300 people attending the various regional workshops. There was generally broad acceptance of the guide, but there were some key issues that needed addressing.

A review meeting had been proposed for beginning of December, with the intention to publish the guidance in February 2009.

Key issues raised were:

- Guide suggested "Ancient" and "Native" were the same – they're not!
- Guide would be published with no certainty to earlier respondents that their comments had been considered.
- Proposal to convene a small informal working group of AFG contacts to review final draft.

Action 11. Richard B. to raise concerns with Rebecca Isted, and to report back to AFG members.

Item 7 European Protected Species Training.

Steve gave a brief update as to future proposed training. He highlighted the current review that EU solicitors and the EU Environment-Director were making into the GB interpretation of the Regulations. A final outcome is expected around 23rd November. As a result the training events had been put back until March / April 2009.

It is intended to hold eight regional, field based events aimed at agents and owners and designed to improve their knowledge in identifying roosting/resting sites etc. within the woodland context. Due to limited staff resource within both FC and NE it would be necessary to restrict numbers attending to approximately 35 per event. ICF has expressed an interest in helping to organise these events. Availability of the key FC and NE staff is the main constraint on providing extra courses. Members were disappointed at the restriction on numbers and suggested that demand would far outweigh this. This was accepted but it was felt some events, were better than none at all. One option raised was the possibility of training industry experts, who would then organise further field based events.

Action 12. Steve to raise training options with Rebecca Isted, and to report back to members.

Item 9 AOB

Andrew reported that the issue of EPS checklists and their inconsistent use by regional teams had been raised with him. Some agents had expressed concerns that some regions required that checklists are completed at the same time as applying for a licence or grant aid, whilst others didn't. The intention would be to standardise the regional approaches once we had the final feedback from the EU.

Action 13. Andrew to advise regional teams of standard approach, once outcome of EU review is known.

Richard B. outlined changes to the National Office in England, due to the expiry of the Cambridge building lease in May 2010. This would result in the closure of this office, with a move of the Finance, Secretariat/Communication and G & R functions to Bristol over the coming 18 months. The lease on a new, larger Bristol office, on the same Business Park, has now been signed.

Dates of next meetings.

Proposed dates for 2009 are:

Thursday 14th May

Thursday 12th November