

Notes / Action Points From The Meeting of the Applicants Focus Group (AFG), Held at the National Motorcycle Museum, Birmingham 19th May 2008.

Present:

Richard Britton (Forestry Commission England (FCE) chair), Andrew Smith (FCE), Craig Harrison (FCE), Richard Sochacki (ConFor), Charles Dutton (SW Region), Tim Shardlow (ICF), Neville Elstone (ICF), John Lockhart (RICS), John Morris (SWA), Mike Seville (CLA), Chris McGloin (Community Forests), John Blessington (LA's), Andrew Sharkey (Wildlife and Countryside Link), Steve Hunt (FCE), Tony House (RPASMU)

Apologies:

Judith Webb (RFS), Mike Wood (RSPB), Andrea Graham (NFU) and Matthew Biddle (FCA), Karen Simpson (FCE), Simon Pryor (FCE) and Paul Johnston (FCE).

Item 1 Welcome and introductions:

Richard Britton welcomed everyone to the meeting, especially the new RPA and SW AFG representatives, Tony House and Charles Dutton. For their benefit, Richard gave a brief format for the day and asked all members to introduce themselves. Richard asked for AOB items - the tree safety conference to be discussed at a suitable point in the meeting.

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

| Action Point | Progress |
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| 1. Draft minutes to group members within week, two weeks to respond, draft minutes on web within one month. | Agreed that this had worked well and should continue for future meetings. |
| 2. Standard list of acronyms | Briefly discussed this and agreed that the standard convention of full meaning first, followed by acronyms for the remainder of the minutes should be followed. |
| 3. Invite FCE Head of Development to future meeting | FCE Programme Group will shortly be subject to review. Hold this action as pending until the review and its recommendations are complete. |
| Minutes 30 th October | Previous minutes regarding woodfuel. Richard confirmed the appointment of Angela Duignan on a three-year contract as Head of Woodfuel Implementation in England. Members suggested that she attend the November 2008 meeting. This would be reviewed nearer the time. |
| 4. Red Band Needle Blight | Confirmed that an updated Research Information Note (RIN 49) was due to be released May / June, which would contain the latest information regarding species susceptibility. |
| 5. Co-ordination of training and information. | Ref. item 7 on agenda. |

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| 6. AFG Terms of Reference (ToR). | Craig has drafted a revised version of the original 2002 ToR that he proposed to the meeting. This brought the wording into today's context and expanded the remit of the group to include appropriate industry wide issues rather than just the England Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS) and regional subjects. Members suggested that care should be taken to avoid duplicating work of other groups, and also ensure there are no voids. General agreement to the changes made. |
| England's Trees, Woodlands and Forests (ETWF) | Richard briefly updated members on the current situation. Covered in later action points review. |
| 7. – 11. Rural Development Plan for England (RDPE) issues. | Agreed that all these action points would be covered during the main agenda, specifically Papers 1 and 3. |
| 12 and 13. Terms and Conditions (T's & C's) for EWGS | Consultation period for these was extended by one month. Details of comments received, a review of these and the final draft version of the T's and C's are available for viewing on the Web Page. Craig confirmed that a draft article for the Law Gazette was still to be written. |
| 14. Claims payment and remittance advice. | Closed. |
| 15 and 16. ETWF | <p>Members that attended gave a brief update on the 1 May Stakeholders' workshop. A number of issues had been highlighted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic viability needed addressing. • Grants barely mentioned as a means of encouraging owners (although noted that owners were being directed to other funding, mainly RDPE, such as woodfuel. • General comments were that, for a two and a half-year plan, the document was too long, too wordy and very repetitive. <p>Action 1. Members to feed comments back to Programme Group (PG) before the deadline of 31 May 2008.</p> <p>Members were reminded that the work of PG was currently concentrating on getting the paper to Ministers before the summer recess. Communication of the contents would be focused in the Autumn.</p> |
| 17 and 18. Habitats Regulation. | A brief update paper was distributed to the group. The issue of 'Certificate of Attendance' was being looked into for the proposed field training events. Short project plan was currently being drafted to identify the viability of running these events, given the limitations of FCE staff resource and expected interest. Members identified some disappointment at the basic nature of the initial seminars. Consideration should be given to future training events being sponsored / organised by the industry, in particular ConFor and ICF with FC input into the training on the day. |

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| | Action 2. Steve to identify options in project plan for consideration by senior staff in National Grants & Regulation Team. |
| 19. UKFS | Confirmed that John Vaughan still the contact for this work. UKWAS were also involved in the process. Identified that two new standards were due to be released in the near future. Small, Low Intensity Managed Forests (SLIMF) and Organic Woodland. Action 3. Members sending comments to John to copy Richard and Steve into any correspondence, for information. Action 4. Raise the two new standards in the agenda for the November meeting, if launched. |
| Tree Safety Conference, 29 th May, at the National Geographic Society, London | Working group had become aware of a new standard for tree safety being drafted by the British Standard Institute (BSI). Concerns that this was being drafted in isolation, mainly with the arboricultural sector in mind. BSI had been contacted and they had agreed to hold any consultation exercise on their Standard until after the conference had been held. Further discussion would then take place in an effort to prevent publication of an unbalanced standard for the industry as a whole. |

Item 3 Rural Development Plan for England – programme update for EWGS/FWPS. (Paper 1)

Andrew introduced the paper to group members, reminding them that the scope covered the previous year, the current and looked forward to next year. The 07 / 08 year had been the first time for some years that FCE had not exhausted grant funds before the end of the financial period. There would always be difficulty in precisely balancing demand with the available funding. Regional teams had been able to bring claims from the 08 /09 year forward for payment allowing better use of funds and increasing potential headroom for next year.

Two key outcomes were identified:

- Woodland Creation Grant (WCG) aided the establishment of 2,260 hectares of woodland (against the RDPE target of 2,200 hectares).
- Woodland Restocking Grant (WRG) aided the establishment of 1,300 hectares of replanting valued at £1.3 million. The majority of this work was on Ancient Woodland Sites or for the conversion of a previously coniferous crop to broadleaf species (65 percent by area and 75 percent by value).

This may not be the full picture as it is likely that some conifer restocking was going ahead without grant aid. There was also recognition (clearly identified in last year's AFG+ Grants Workshop) that the current grant aid does not support low input forestry systems such as Continuous Cover (CCF). AFG members felt some regional teams dealt with this issue better than others. CCF England group offered assistance where practicable.

Action 5: FCE national team to identify best practice when dealing with CCF issues and disseminate.

Defra now responsible for setting our commitment targets and for the majority of our grant aid budget (except Woodland Grant Scheme Annual Management payments and EWGS WRG) as outlined in the paper. Lack of certainty over funding, the 150 Euro limit for non farmers, increases in crop values and land prices were all serving to undermine confidence in the industry not just with owners, but also FCE staff. AFG members felt this will undoubtedly be reflected in the number of applicants for EWGS this coming year.

Richard highlighted the role of the RDPE Programme Monitoring Committee (PMC) as an important forum where the forestry sector should look to make its views and concerns known.

Action 6. Circulate the details of PMC membership to AFG members. For PMC details see Defra website:

www.defra.gov.uk/rural/rdpe/committee.htm

Members stressed that FCE needed to release the prospectus as early as possible in future years, to catch the period when owners are reviewing their options. There are some good stories to be told and FCE were urged to advertise these more widely, possibly same time as release of prospectus? Status of “farmer definition” was raised. Scotland and Wales have gone different routes with England taking what appears to be a middle road. There are still some final discussions to be had.

Item 4 *GLOS Development Update.* (Paper 2)

Full details are in the paper. Craig outlined the system of development, where functionality is being released in discrete blocks, as opposed to a fully functional system in one go. This has resulted in some areas of work being deferred e.g. E-business, whilst other, more important elements of functionality (usually resulting from changes to EU regulations, paying agency requirements etc.) are being developed. The group understood the issues and felt that expectation management was key. A number of issues were discussed by the group with reference to development in GLOS and time scales involved, including:

- Electronic mapping functionality,
- Felling Licences,
- Management of functionality issues / snags
- Time scales involved in introducing required changes.

Action 7. FCE to develop a process to handle electronic applicant comments regarding functionality problems/suggestions.

Item 5 *Paying agency update.* (Paper 3)

Paper updated group members on a number of issues relevant to the paying agency status.

- Customer and Land Registration.

Operations Note 19 had been produced and was available on the website.

Highlighted an exercise to gather SBI numbers from beneficiaries that were due an annual payment for either FWP or WMG this year to enable payment to be made.

- BACS Details.

Requirement for WGS claimants to provide BACS details to enable FC to pay all future claims.

Action 8. FCE to check the legality of imposing this on payees potentially mid way through an approved contract period.

- Single Payment Scheme (SPS) applications.

Highlighted the need for claimants in 2008 to declare woodland areas on their SPS returns (SP5 form). FCE had secured confirmation from RPA that, as not all forestry land has been registered, woodland owners would not be penalised this year for failure to declare. In future it would be simpler for **all** woodland interests would be identified on an SP5 return, as a one off exercise, rather than identifying just those in an FC scheme.

Action 9. FCE to confirm with RPA acceptability of owners stating all woodland on SP5, via comments procedure on SPS2009 booklet.

- SPS and Removal of 'Ten Month Rule'.

Changes to the rules could have a detrimental effect, especially in relation to new planting schemes, where owners have been in receipt of SPS. Claims for SPS in one calendar year would now mean that any planting must take place after 1st January the following year.

Action 10. FCE to confirm that the interpretation of the 'Ten Month Rule' change is correct.

- Cross Compliance (CC).

Owners entering woodlands into EWGS for either FWP or WMG since 1st February 2007 will now be subject to a 1% selection of schemes for a full on site compliance inspection. Members were concerned that this was opening up owners to greater scrutiny and that this would potentially put some off applying for grant aid.

- GAEC 12 scrub derogation.

This derogation had been introduced in order to prevent abandonment of land, the recognition being that in some instances it was beneficial to allow land to scrub naturally. This could potentially allow land to regenerate naturally whilst still receiving SPS funding. Potential issue with EIA and afforestation.

Item 7 Advice, Extension and Training within the Forestry Sector in England. (Paper 4)

Neville introduced his paper. He had been amazed at the quantity of information that was available on the web through multiple delivery points, but with little co-ordination between them. This was also true of events, demonstrations and training where each were identified in isolation. There is a need to clearly identify what is available. Organisations, including FCE, must have good conduits to allow owners and other interested parties easy access to the wealth of information available. The FC had a huge resource of research information, but the FC's website search engine is extremely poor.

Similarly, the provision of training could be much more joined up within the industry. FCE should see other organisations such as ICF, ConFor and RICS as a resource to help deliver future training.

Action 11. AFG members to feed ideas back to FCE, with regards to ways of identifying and improving access to the information available.

Action 12. FCE to invite Hugh Williams from FC Research Communications to the next meeting.

Action 13. Neville and Richard S. to consider how future training opportunities could be improved.

Item 8 AOB.

- FCE Outreach commitment 2008 –09.

Richard identified the commitments for the current year. The consultation for the 'England Practice Guide for Ancient and Native Woodlands', was due to be launched soon with a series of regional events. Attendance at these events will be by invitation from the regional teams and there was some criticism that some agents had received multiple invitations, which did not appear to be co-ordinated. This made it difficult to decide the best timing and location to attend. Consideration was being given to a series of field events in the Autumn, in connection with European Protected Species. Other organisations such as RICS, ConFor and ICF had expressed an interest in co-ordinating such events and this would be considered over the coming weeks.

Members asked whether consideration had been given by FCE to seeking alternative sources of funding for these events.

Action 14. FCE to investigate whether RDPE funding, through the Regional Development Agencies, could be utilised for this purpose.

- Briefing notes for future meetings.

Richard explained the use of briefing notes within other meetings. Members were concerned to have more discussion time at meetings and thought that this was a good idea.

Action 15. FCE to prepare briefing notes for the next meeting.

Date of next meeting –13th November 2008, at the National Motorcycle Museum, Birmingham.