

AFG minutes 7th July 2017
Ref: AFG 1/2017
Location: National Conference Centre, National Motorcycle Museum, B92 0EJ
Chair: Joe Watts
Prepared by: Simon James
Attendees

AFG members: James Russell (Community Forests) **JR**, Justin Mumford (RICs) **JM**, Graham Garratt (ICF) **GG**, Caroline Harrison (Confor) **CH**, Brian Fraser (HTA) **BF**, Richard Sochacki (Confor) **RS**, Neville Elstone (ICF) **NE**, Claire Robinson (NFU) **CR**, Julian Ohlsen (SW AFG and Woodland Management Companies) **JO**, Andy Shirley-Priest (RFS) **ASP**, Gareth Hopkins (Wildlife and Countryside Link) **GH** and Juliette Young (Wildlife and Countryside Link) **JY** on the phone.

FC: James Murdoch (Regulations Manager), Alec Rhodes (National Incentives Manager), Penny Oliver (National SFM Team Leader), Joe Watts (Head of SFM), Barnaby Wylder (Tree Health Officer), Simon James (Regulations Manager), Ewan Calcott (National Regulations Manager), Steve Fowkes (Adviser - Business and Markets) and Patrick Stephens (Field Manager SE&L) on FaceTime.

Apologies

Mike Seville (CLA), John Lockhart (RICS), Lawrence Weston (Wildlife and Countryside Link), John Blessington (Local Government), Matt Taylor (Small Woods Association), Paula Reading (Defra), Stephen Penlington (Defra).

Next AFG meeting

9th November 2017 @ The Priory Rooms, Quaker Meeting House, 40 Bull Street, Birmingham, B4 6AF - <http://www.theprioryrooms.co.uk/>

Actions arising

Action	Task	Owner	Update/Outcome
1	Felling License Online: Request that existing consents/AA forms are honoured.	Strategic Development Tea (SDT)	
2	Felling License Online: consider proposals from AFG member discussion	SDT	
3	AFG members are invited to volunteer for the Felling License Online development group. Please contact harry.birch@forestry.gov.uk	AFG members	
4	FC to look at application process to include EIA.	Ewan Calcott	
5	Customer feedback: FC to report on the split between CS and felling licence customers	Penny Oliver	
6	Customer feedback: AFG members to feedback to survey response and input to survey on information distribution	AFG members	

7	Revisit customer survey with a traffic light approach	Penny Oliver	
8	FC to look at analysis of the portion of WMP that subsequently go on to higher tier.	Alec Rhodes	
9	AFG members to feedback regarding HS2 funding	AFG members	
10	AFG members to feedback regarding the Woodland Monitoring Tool	AFG members	
11	Chair to look at the proposal to host interim conference calls / webinar twice a year	Joe Watts	
12	AFG members to feedback to James Murdoch your views on AFG meeting format	AFG members	
13	Check Proactive Land Change Detection (PLCD) and whether process is in place for measurement on 2-D from 3-D	Penny Oliver (tbc)	
14	AFG members to feedback to Joe if you have any comment regarding Woodland Trust having a bespoke seat at the AFG.	AFG members	

Agenda items – to be used in conjunction with the 7th July 2017 agenda

2 Minutes and actions from previous meeting (Joe Watts)

Minutes accepted

All actions closed

3 Tree health

3a Proposed annual pest and disease survey programme (Barnaby Wylder)

Please find the links below for additional resource.

[Phytophthora spp.](#)

[Ash dieback](#)

[Pathogens affecting sweet chestnut](#)

[Pathogens affecting plane](#)

[Xylella fastidiosa](#)

[Oak processionary moth](#)

[Emerald Ash borer](#)

3b SPHN enforcement (Simon James)

The proposed SPHN enforcement action was welcomed by AFG members.

The time lag for enforcement was highlighted and although the time between expiry and action is regrettable the action remains necessary. The enforcement action is not time barred in legislation.

The NRW position on Phytophthora ramorum control was raised and there were concerns that strategies conflict. Suggestion by AFG that FC ensure a robust response is readied.

The consequence of felled timber and recovery of costs were discussed. The approach deemed appropriate will ensure the felled timber is safe following industry good practices which will likely include snedding. It is not FC's intention to market the timber; recovery of costs will be invoiced to the landowner in line with the regulations.

Can the recipients of the enforcement action receive grant support? Enforcement action may not automatically preclude the landowner from grant support. The approach will endeavour to achieve a preferred outcome which may include grant support if necessary to establish cooperation for ongoing management.

Fore warning on contractor availability and suitability. Aim to use FC call-off contractor for tree health work and employ an external Forest Works Manager.

A communications plan has been prepared in readiness to address media interest and any concerns.

4 Regulations

4a Felling licence online (Ewan Calcott)

No slide pack available at this stage while the system is in development.

AFG requested that spatial data is uploadable as part of the minimum viable product (MVP). This feature continues to be part of the MVP and is desirable for its potential to make applying for felling more efficient.

Agent Authority (AA) Form will remain a requirement. This may not be part of the MVP and therefore not integrated into the system short-term but may feature outside of the system for AO to confirm relationship.

There are no plans within the MVP to link an application to the RPA or record an owner's Single Business Identifier (SBI).

Profiles will have a customer number reference.

Concern was raised (JO) that this is yet another number. Highlighting an opportunity missed as [it was suggested] 80% of customers will already have a customer reference in some form (SBI, CRM, etc.).

Action (1) Request that existing consents/AA forms are honoured.

An example given by AFG member (GG) that they are on 5th AA form for one Estate.

FC highlighted a potential vulnerability that multiple agents for an Estate may prove to be an issue. However this is being worked through.

Action (2) FC to consider proposals discussed by AFG members:

- (JO) A need for there to be just one AA form for an owner linked to SBI or CRM
- (CR) Look at how FLA interacts with CS cross-referencing and SBI
- (CR) Reminder that RLR is the mapping base for farmers
- (CR) A need to check spatial reference with Natural England
- (GG) Look at interaction with planning grant, PA3 and 10yr licence
- (ASP) It was highlighted that Natural Resources Wales (NRW) online mapping has/had glitches where free drawing a compartment shape was not compatible. FC continues to desire functionality for drawing and uploading spatial data as part of the MVP.

AFG member (NE) asked why is FC doing this? One reason is that internally the FC Felling Licence Database will shortly have IT support withdrawn due to the platform version being out of date.

Action (3) AFG members are invited to volunteer to be testers as part of a development group. All members are welcome to provide a wish list from the applicant's point of view, highlighting the priorities.

4b Management plan pilot (Patrick Stephens)

See 4b MP Pilot as part of the agenda pack for 7th July.

AFG member (JO) feedback and started by:

Thanking South East team for doing the pilot.

- This has made a real difference in getting plans through, in the past very vocal on how long plans took as some were taking more than a year, which didn't include application and RLR period.
- Going on the register early is a benefit and a major step forward.
- Writing to consultees and getting no reply, we can demonstrate that we have consulted but if we get no reply then this shouldn't hold up a plan up.
- Timescale of getting a Woodland Officer (WO) on to site prior to agreeing a plan, no evidence of this being a constraint but what are the lead-in times? - Patrick responded: Possible constraint if site visits are requested in the 2 quarters where we experience high levels of CS applications. Suggest organising pre-visits in plenty of time if likely to be in the busy periods.

AFG member (ASP) suggested abandoning the windows for applications as this is a constraint. FC clarified that Woodland Management Plan applications are open all year round and we are constrained by EU regarding a single start date for multi-annual agreements.

FC is not suggesting applications should be avoided in busy periods; the assessment of peak work periods is intended to manage expectations.

AFG member (JM) echoed that the pilot has made a difference and added that the delivery periods were ambitious and would like FC to manage expectations. Would rather FC said 5 to 6 weeks to approve a plan and hit nearer 100% rather than say 28 days.

(GG) Will WO's have discretion over larger plans and the time this will take to deliver? Patrick responded: big plans that require more work will inevitably take longer, so long as the WO follows the procedure it is hoped/likely the WO will average 80% of management plan case work delivered within the 28 days.

(GG) Will the WO have the discretion to make more than one visit? Patrick responded: If the WO needs to visit more than once then it is for them manage this, there is no restriction on visits.

4c EIA changes (Ewan Calcott)

FC is awaiting Government response to EIA consultation.

(JR) Can efficiencies be made with creation plans mirroring the requirements for EIA? The creation plan should highlight the themes required for EIA.

Action (4) FC to look at application process to include EIA.

AFG member (JY) raised concerns over timeframe for notification and if applicants don't hear back then the applicants are given the greenlight.

(JY) Cumulative impact where a number of smaller projects may have significance to surrounding habitat impact in combination. Ewan responded: Legislation has not been changed regarding this.

How is mitigation on an impact, where a project is given the go ahead, tracked and assured? Ewan responded: Yes there will be monitoring and tracking including opportunity to feedback indices of size and impact.

EIA guidance is key and FC will look at working with the sector with a webinar/training.

4d Growth duty (James Murdoch)

See 4d Growth Duty PowerPoint. No further comments.

5 Incentives

5a Customer feedback (Penny Oliver)

FC is focusing on the negatives because we want to address these issues.

(CR) Were they CS customers?

Action (5) FC report on the split between CS and FLA customers.

AFG member (ASP) remarked that Agents compare experiences over many years and (JO) when something goes wrong it is more memorable. Also (ASP) the loss of individual admin support and the knowledge they had of the site has had an impact.

(ASP) Are there plans to have access to mapping through RLR. Other AFG member (JO) suggested access is available.

(JO) Suggest new staff know about legacy.

(RS) What is a SLA – Service Level Agreement is a service provided internally and across government departments

(CR) Where applications have RPA issues, can FC go back and sort these? Penny responded: FC has a gateway into RPA to raise specific case queries.

(JO) Seeing issues over again with same applications.

Action (6) AFG members asked to feedback to survey response and input to survey on information distribution.

Action (7) AFG member (NE) remarked this was an excellent response and FC have listened to the survey and responded in multiple ways. Asked if we could revisit this with a traffic light approach. Also can't believe there is not an ombudsmen for RPA payments.

AFG member (CR) asked if this was the improvement action plan? Penny responded: this is not the improvement action plan from RPA, NE and FC linked to the Efra Committee.

5b Woodland creation (Alec Rhodes)

Oversubscribed on WD2 within the year but will not be an issue with flexibility between years.

In reaction to woodland management plan (WMP) interim figure AFG member (JO) asked if FC can clearly indicate a link with WMP and higher tier, concern there may be a decline and loss of faith.

Action (8) FC to look at analysis of the portion of WMP that subsequently go to higher tier.

FC have seen an increase in standalone felling licences

AFG member (ASP) remarked that there has been an increased use of intermediate thinning licences to fill the gap.

(BF) trees planted figure (2.6m) misleading. Penny responded: only trees claimed for payment after planting are counted as part of FC official statistics.

AFG member (CH) remarked that they would like to know which species are actually planted at the claim stage.

Including infrastructure (option FY2) in creation? Three AFG members (JR)(JM)(GH) remarked that they would be in support of this; however other representation (JO) suggested that South East would be reluctant to invest at that early stage and (GG) asked why make that expensive investment with little immediate return. (JM) Compromise and establish hard standing and entrances.

Woodland Carbon Code (Alec Rhodes)

Remains open, multi-purpose forestry with a commercial element to sequester carbon.

AFG members invited to comment:

- (CH) EIA issues holding up CS, WCF clear of CS and potentially a better/more attractive way to go.

- (GH) Lack of annual payments on WCF
- (NE) BPS not paying enough
- (JO) Setting the bar high but for less money
- (CH) In Scotland the scheme has taken off
- (NE) Suggest a comparison is done across the member states to ascertain the rates per hectare
- (NE) Going below 30ha will open it up to more applications
- (ASP) Why does it not apply to restocking – the fund is for new carbon sequestration.

HS2 (Alec Rhodes)**PLEASE NOTE THE MAP IS SENSITIVE AND NOT FOR FURTHER CIRCULATION**

(ASP) Is resilience and conifers covered by this grant? Penny responded: the planting will consist of native and honorary accommodating 20% conifers as per the native woodland species standard.

(ASP) There should be more of a push for species diversity, squirrels, etc.

John Weir is involved and this grant is still in development.

(CR) Is this biodiversity offsetting or is it additional money? Additional

(NE) Why not give more than 100%? The 100% of costs is based on state aid rules

Action (9) AFG members to feedback

5c Woodland improvement – monitoring tool (Penny Oliver)

Action (10) AFG members to feedback

6 Joint FC England & ICF training (Neville Elstone)

Largely been covered by previous presentations and delighted FC and ICF are working together with the up and coming seminars.

7 Future format of AFG meetings (Joe Watts)

(CH) Members have in past meetings requested that items are given sufficient time to be discussed.

Broadly a change to the format is welcome to provision more time for items deserving deeper discussion which may be best served by a workshop or webinar.

Action (11) The chair will look at the proposal to host interim conference calls twice a year.

Proposed change may comprise of:

- Feb/Mar - teleconference/webinar
- May – Face to face
- Sept – teleconference/webinar
- Nov – Face to face

Action (12) AFG members please feedback to James Murdoch any views on meeting format

8 Any other business (Joe Watts)

Look out for UK Forestry Standard launch and seminars

RPA release changes see Proactive Land Change Detection (PLCD) email dated 11th July from Simon James.

Action (13) Comment made regarding dependence on measurement that included slopes but now the maps are 2D changing the area, make sure process is in place.

Action (14) Chair has been approached by Woodland Trust requesting a seat at the meeting in addition to that associated with the Wildlife and Countryside Link. AFG members to feedback to Joe if you have any comments.

END