

Applicants Focus Group Meeting

Priory Rooms Conference Centre,
Birmingham

21st May 2015

Group Members Present:

Nick Phillips (NP) (Wildlife and Countryside Link), Neville Elstone (NE) (ICF), Andrew Woods (AW) (RFS), Mike Seville (MS) (Country, Land and Business Association – CLA), Tim Shardlow (TS) (ICF), Caroline Harrison (CH) (ConFor), Simon Mageean (SM) (Wildlife & Countryside Link), Julian Ohlsen (JO) (Woodland Management Companies and SW AFG), Justin Mumford (JM) (RICS), John Blessington (JB) (LGA), Claire Robinson (CR) (NFU)

Attendees Present:

Joe Watts (JW) (FC) – **Chair**, Steve Scott (SS) (FC), Donna Tavernor (DT) (FC), Richard Britton (RB) (FC), Paula Reading (PR) (DEFRA), Rob Green (RG) (NE), Sam Neck (SN) (FC), Kate Hawley (KH) (FC) Mike Render (MR) (FC) , Andrew Smith (AS) (FC), Ian Tubby (IT) (FC), Miriam Jones-Walters (MJW) (FC) – **Notes**.

Apologies:

Allan McBain (RPA), Brian Fraser (HTA), Chris McGloin (Community Forests), Matthew Willets (RICS), Gary Battell (RICS), Lucy Stapleton (RPA)

New Actions from this Meeting

Agenda Item	Action		Response
2	1.	PR: Cross-compliance requirements for woodland: clarify bullet point 5	See the notes on the item
2	2.	JW/ MR: Can the article in Chartered forester magazine on GAEC 7c rules be distributed more widely?	
2	3.	PR: Farm advice framework, set up a discussion with the sector to discuss this further. Anyone interested in attending	

		should contact Paula Reading.	
2	4.	PR: Name the regional suppliers for the Farm Advice Framework:	See appendix
3	5.	KH Capital grants application forms: provide more guidance on extending tables and refine questions to agents as currently slightly unclear	Guidance Updated
3	6.	SN/ KH: Confirm whether geo-tagging has been removed from woodland creation applications and if/what it will be replaced with.	Guidance updated
4.	7.	AS to send JW a link to the agent authority forms v4 on FC website. JW to investigate if this should have been removed.	
5.	8.	KH to supply guidance on RLR land parcel numbers and how to find them	Guidance updated
7.	9.	JW: How are we defining unmanaged conifer in scoring? JW: to check on PDF maps for scoring	Guidance and scoring form Updated
8.	10.	IT: Will it be a FC management plan or a UKFS management plan that is to be audited.	
8.	11.	IT: Key people to be involved in the UKFS compliance development should be suggested to Ian Tubby	

1. Welcome and Introductions

2. Previous actions and briefing paper (JW)

Actions:

JW invited comments on previous actions. No comments at present.

Budget: The finance forecast predicts expenditure over the Higher Tier of the new program and presents how monies will be divided for the time being. There will be a

degree of between-year flexibility which will allow annual review of progress and possible reallocation of monies.

Cross compliance requirements for woodland:

MS raised concern that it is still not clear what will be considered inside or outside woodlands and thus subject to cross compliance. The lack of clarity will lead to people breaking cross compliance. Section 4 of the briefing paper refers to exceptions to the cross compliance requirement not to cut trees from 1st March – 31st August. This includes written permission from the secretary of state. MS questioned how permission can be sought and what this means in practice.

Action: PR to clarify bullet point 5 “*The secretary of state has given written permission to do so in order to enhance the environment, improve public or agricultural access, or for reasons relating to livestock or crop production*”

It was suggested that the allowed window for cutting will pose problems for agriculture as access is difficult in winter months due to unsuitable ground.

Action: Can the article in Chartered forester magazine on GAEC 7c rules be distributed more widely? JW/ MR

Staff changes:

National Office: Samantha Neck- Regulations National Team Manager, Kate Hawley- Incentives National Team Manager.

Farm Advice Framework (FAF):

NE asked whether this was co-financed through the EU and the Treasury. The answer is yes.

NE also asked whether ICF would be providing business advice. An action was agreed.

Action: PR to set up meeting with sector representatives to discuss the use of the FAF for forestry.

The three national suppliers are ADAS, PROMAR and APADO.

Action: PR to add the names of the regional suppliers: Please see table in appendix.

It is up to LEPs to determine what sort of advice they deem necessary in their local area. MR stated there is no budget yet available for forestry. When this was initially discussed there were divergent views on whether it would be necessary to allocate budget. The EU member states are required to have a FAF budget, if provision of advice for woodland creation/ management is deemed vital this cannot come from FAF budget and must be redirected from the forestry budget. This has not yet been allocated but the framework has the flexibility to accommodate this if necessary.

Chalara Ash dieback in SSSIs:

Please contact Jane Hull if you have an opinion on what advice we need to provide (Jane.hull@forestry.gsi.gov.uk)

3. Capital Grants Update (Paper 2) – JW

Woodland creation figures collated around one week ago. The deadline of the 30th April was upheld and the final deadline of the end of May still stands. The grant offer being opened this spring has allowed for the ca. 1000 ha in addition to existing EWGS agreements. Whilst we should expect some fallout after scoring this is a positive result.

CH asked if we could provide a species breakdown for the 1000ha applied for as useful data for the sector. JW suggested that whilst we will be unlikely to provide a full species breakdown, after scoring we can distinguish between broadleaf and conifer and also analyse biodiversity scores as a guideline.

Feedback and reflections:

Reflected that the process was very complicated and obtaining a CRN was difficult, the group agreed that it was easier to obtain a CRN over the phone and some people reported that the process was smooth, overall reviews were mixed.

AS has since provided the following information:

At yesterday's meeting frustration was expressed regarding the verify process. The .Gov web page indicates registration can be via Verify or the phoning RPA helpline. What is perhaps not clear is that for existing customers (this would include all those who have received annual claim letters) the full verify requirements (photo-card driving licence etc.) are not required by phoning the helpline. This is because RPA staff have access to key FC agreement data that allows a cross match, provided the agreement holder can quote key information as below. In some cases for those that have the required Verify ID documentation that route may still be easier. New customers without an existing agreement will have to use the verify route.

FC customers who have failed Verify will be asked questions by the CSC relating to their agreements (SBI, agreement start & end dates, total value, total Ha, agreement years). Customers quoting their SBI will generate a list of all their agreements; CSC staff will then ask the customer what agreement they would like to answer the security questions on. This will link a customer to agreement data based on their provided SBI.

In addition the timescales this year were very short, reflected across CS. Along with difficulty obtaining CRNs there was not enough time to cost schemes.

On a positive note it was easy to score above the threshold. It was noted that it was difficult to interpret the scoring and hence whether applications would be successful. This should be clearer next year when we have a better idea of what constitutes a successful score. Some parties took advantage of the opening as they perceived a bigger opportunity for success whilst some held back to observe how the process worked.

The forms for the capital grants seemed to have issues and inconsistencies. **Action: KH to provide more guidance on extending tables and refine questions to agents as currently slightly unclear.**

Question regarding the rationale for requesting geo-tagged photos for woodland creation. KH/ SN Awaiting final go ahead from the RPA to remove geo tagging; this is likely to still need a map and direction of photograph.

Communications could be better. Important updates should be directed to people's attention, avoiding the need for people to look for updates on the website. It would be useful to have a glossary of terms i.e. 'land', 'holding', 'scheme', 'claim' for absolute clarity.

JW- Feedback will set us up well to improve the process next year.

4. Annual claims processing and Agent authority (SN)

Of the 7,226 annual claim forms sent out to applicants, ca. 2,050 have come back, 1,800 completed, 250 incomplete and therefore returned with a request for the additional information. Reminder calls will start w/c 1st June for unreturned forms. TS asked whether it was a legal requirement to ask customers to obtain a CRN. AS answered yes. FC previously resisted the need for annual claims however forestry agreements are subject to RD regulations. Agreement T&Cs stipulate that contracts are subject to RD regulations which do change.

The RPA deserve praise for the amount of help they have offered agents in registering and obtaining CRNs.

The FC are required to update agent authority forms to include a clear declaration from the owner regarding responsibility for the scheme, subsequently the form has been refreshed and issued with the multi-annual claims. In future agent and owner CRNs will be linked and associated permissions managed via Rural Payments.

AW highlighted that version 4 of the agent authority form is still on the FC website. AS advised the website had been updated and requested that any example links are sent to SN to investigate.

5. Countryside stewardship draft Manual (Papers 3 and 4) KH

KH invited input from the applicants on the manual.

The manual is currently very high level and not the only guidance applicants can access on forestry. We are currently working on making this clear; a glossary of terms is also already in the scope of the manual.

RLR field numbers have been added as a column on the application form. Language and forms need to tie in with RPA processes so the forms can go on the RPA web pages. Applicants will need to know how to access RLR field numbers. This should be addressed at the level of the management plan.

It was noted that land that drops off the RLR register (thus is not registered when applying for a new scheme) if for which the numbers change is not the applicant's

issue. Also whether we use sub-compartment boundaries and how this will work needs to be addressed.

Action: KH to supply guidance on RLR land parcel numbers and how to find them.

There is a single application per SBI per year. This can contain multiple agreements. Scoring will be on a holding level and not at the level of the full application. We need to confirm whether this is feasible in RP. We need a glossary of terms re. How this will be defined i.e. define 'agreement', 'application', 'holding', 'land', 'land parcel'. RPA is addressing splitting one estate into several SBIs.

Action: More than one SBI on the same parcel, KH to communicate rules.

Need to define two types of funding on same parcel of land: funding in this context means from another public body not private funding- we cannot check private funds on all the parcels of land.

Clarification required in the form of wording on the application form re. When an EIA needs to be completed in relation to the application deadline.

EIA: does all supplementary information need to be supplied for deadline or BEFORE so that it can be evaluated for the deadline? This will be sent as a question to address at the next meeting.

Contents will be hyperlinked to the relevant section of the document. The document can be saved as a PDF in which hyperlinks will work. NE is considering issuing a USB with all guidance but be aware that new versions are appearing frequently.

It will be made clear to applicants applying to the Higher Tier that the expression of interest deadline of 30th June will not apply to woodland only applications once the manual is signed off by NE. This will include a clause for AE applicants to apply after the deadline but with limited support.

The clause stating one application per applicant/ beneficiary should be defined in glossary and consistency needs to be developed here regarding whether applicant means SBI holder or other.

The prescriptions for Woodland improvement are clearly stated in WD2. Agreement to these prescriptions will be clearly stated in the application form.

In summary it was felt that the manual was long and complex. But also that the guidance was in good, clear English. Concern was expressed that the complexity would deter bringing unmanaged woodland back into management and go for a felling licence instead. It was noted that the end result of this is also managed woodlands which is a positive, however if the grants money is not taken up it may be lost to the sector and this must be considered. Guidance needs to be as clear as possible as to whether a grant is the best option for the customer.

6. Application process, forms and FC/NE joint ways of working (Papers 5-7) JW/KH

For Woodland only properties, FC officer will be contact, AE: NE advisor, mixed applications will have two advisors with NE advisor as lead unless it is obvious to have the FC advisor i.e. in forestry SSSI, as the lead. The greatest benefit will be gained from teams working together. Early feedback as to how this is working will be important, especially to national level.

SSSI consent has been separated from the application process for AE thus the applicant is responsible for getting consent. This is quite a lot for work on a mixed estate, implying 3-4 officers involved in an application (NE will try have the same officer for SSSI consent as CS application but this is not guaranteed). These details need to be resolved.

'Transactional services' for now refers to NE Technical Services staff; this will later be handed to the RPA.

For AE schemes, NE initiates process. For forestry the EoI will be hosted on gov.uk and can be initiated by the customer. FC will communicate when the EoI is live clearly to e-alert list. It will be discussed how best to communicate this

Events will occur in a similar way to the capital grants launch. These will happen in June, details will be circulated soon.

On the basis of a management plan we will be asking for a detailed proposal. This is inputted into Siti agri by a NE Technical Services, not until then will a WO get involved to assure the proposal reflects the management plan. It will be up to the applicant (or empowered agent) to submit the final application once proposal has been ironed out by 30th September.

Although there may be many mini applications under on SBI- at some point the system will bundle up applications under a single SBI and viewed as a whole.

Question: How will it work when there are several agents under one SBI? I.e. if one application is submitted- and the button is pressed, will other applications under the SBI get knocked out? Very complicated when there are a lot of different involved schemes.

- Responsible person under the SBI will collate all the mini sections and submit as a whole (nuclear button)
- We don't know how draft agreements will be communicated to the customer just yet. Issue for clarification. This is a priority that needs to be decided- dealt with at a national level.
- Applicants with estates in both Scotland and England will be allowed two separate submissions

All applicants- (per agreement) must submit an expression of interest. This will go live on the 16th June. Woodland only applications will not be bound by the 30th June

deadline. But AE will. If AE is involved in any way it will need to be in by the 30th June, can be submitted after but won't be guaranteed if submitted by after 30th June. This will comprise of a SIMPLE High level form that will be able to be submitted within the available week.

Since the time of meeting Mike Seville has supplied the following from NE:

Please find below the response from Natural England regarding the number of EoIs required per applicant for the Higher Tier for Countryside Stewardship (this arose from a question at our recent ILG meeting). I am not sure how this relates to the discussion yesterday.

The arrangements for applicants with land in more than one business unit have been under discussion until very recently.

The regulation requires one application per recipient per year. We will expect one EoI per business unit, each one quoting the same SBI and different property names.

We will appraise each EoI separately, and develop the agreements separately for each site that is successful in securing a place on the pipeline. We will pull these together into one overarching application for the final submission, and subsequently we will offer the agreements separately.

This approach meets the needs of the regulation while ensuring that the most environmentally significant holdings end up under agreement.

If you don't have an approved management plan then you are not eligible for the woodland elements.

Management plans which aren't grant aided will need to come into FC to be approved (Part of EU regulations) but do not need to be on a FC template.

Plans that have gone over 5 year renewal revision date **but are still valid** will be ok. Management plans must establish justification for support.

If you have many management plans and some are not yet approved then only applications for land with an approved management plan will be accepted.

Comments:

There is an issue with WO not getting round to approving management plans. Will WO's be prioritising management plans? FC is aware there is an issue but is working hard to get it done. If plans are correct then they should go through quickly. Better plans need less work and will go through quickly. Capacity issues are recognised. At the time of SUBMISSION management plan must be approved therefore does it need to be approved by 30th June deadline? It was commented that there is a long time before actual applications need to be completed. Caution, if applications rely on management plans getting signed off as this will put even more pressure on application getting through. This deadline is to prevent applications being built on plans that are still shifting

Mixed applications: Will two sets of maps go out where applications are mixed? Would forestry agent sub contract to AE agent? This has significant implications for forestry agents as they will lose a lot of work. KH, this is due to the design of the scheme, can this be taken forward to those who have influence on overall scheme design?

A Deadline needs to be set for submitting application pack (proposal) pre WO site visit. Will depend on NE tech services as to how fast they can turn around EoI. This is not in the manual yet as yet to be signed off by NE. **This will be clearly communicated. JW- If we work on end date and use woodland creation as an example we could pencil in start of august for this deadline.**

It was noted that we need to build in time to plan for mixed apps for applicant to fulfil NE requirements (developing AE applications- beta checks etc.). These will probably already be in NE pipeline so they are aware of intentions to have AE schemes ready for this app process. Need clarity so the two processes run together well.

If at this point they want to do AE but have not yet spoken to an NE advisor then it is a short timeline for them to form an AE application with NE. NE apps already in pipeline likely to be owners with schemes about to come to an end. High priority new EoI will get put high on pipeline.

FC are populating an embryo 'pipeline' and will prioritise likely applications i.e. schemes coming to an end, so will have some faculty for a pipeline of sorts. Will be encouraging early EoI for woodland schemes as this will allow for greater help.

Regarding maps: On the EoI will the CPH number will be included to generate maps for relevant areas? Registered management plans should have area covered so should be possible to get area. **This needs to be clarified.**

We understand deadlines are tight so will expect that we need to be realistic this year. Can engage customers early next year when we are aware of how the process goes this year. Budget not used this year may be able to roll forwards.

Since sending out the form for review we have split the form giving three forms for the three application windows. This makes each form smaller and more users friendly.

Could details section of the form be streamlined for people submitting multiple forms by just submitting SBI and CRN? This was the plan for the online application but has had to be revised for the paper form.

Please be in touch with KH with any comments on forms.

7. Countryside Stewardship Scoring (Paper 8) JW/NR

Woodland scoring is part of overall list on habitat priority to reflect the fact that this is a single scheme.

How are we defining unmanaged conifer? In this context Managed vs unmanaged is a different definition to our corporate indicator. Do we need to specify the definition of unmanaged conifer here?

Rationale for priority types:

We are targeting sites that haven't had a felling licence in the last 10 years: Recognise that some sites have licences that haven't been acted upon- however this is a useful definition to use. Could we demonstrate whether woodland has had active management WRT felling licences? We don't have this data- therefore scoring has to be based on data that we have.

It was asked if this disadvantages owners who have started managing in the last 10 years by prioritising places that haven't had an active felling licence. Many managed sites will still get paws points and species points so won't necessarily lose out. We need to target we specifically want to come into the scheme.

How does this apply to amalgamated compartments (separate felling licences) within a single agreement? Will be scored as High priority area x area, + low priority area x area. And compared to management plan and weighted as to what is being done in the area (Scored proportionally to the area that is being acted on)

JW- Scoring will have to be reviewed based on how it performs this year and what is selected.

We will set an AE and Forestry threshold minimum for a mixed application to progress.

We are aware sometimes schemes highly scoring in one element will be below budget line due to low scoring on other side, we are working to address that.

Will we be able to see- on a compartment level- what schemes are scoring on? We have tried to refine external map browsers to be less 'clunky'

NE is producing PDF maps for parcel boundaries to be accessible.

Action: JW to check on these PDF maps.

8. UKFS Compliance (Papers 9-11) -IT

If you have a felling licence and a woodland management plan you can sell wood for wood fuel.

RHI: Supports around 6,500 boilers, processes ca. 1.1million green tonnes of wood, supplied around 145,000 homes with £115 million invested. The government wants to demonstrate that real carbon savings are coming from wood fuels and deforestation is not occurring due to demand for biomass.

Therefore people using the wood fuel subsidy will need to demonstrate they are using sustainable fuel. This will be easy for the end user- the burden will fall on the supply chain.

Around 5% of supply chain will be audited. Of this 5% will be audited deeply thus entailing a small number of visits.

Action: clarify if it is a FC management plan or UKFS management plan that will be audited.

Question: This compliance could be used in many ways. Will there be a more structured process/ discussion for reviewing/ developing this document?

Points suggested for consideration:

Issue: Who is auditing, what they are auditing? Doc should be about tangible evidence of compliance. Process is not complete. Sustainability criteria are international. How will the audit work/ be resourced. UK forestry needs to come up with ideas re. Demonstrating UKFS is being met.

Taskforce argued UKFS should be promoted as a standard that is recognised by other industries. How do we answer that challenge? What process should we go through to get it to a stage where it is auditable? UQAS auditors can assist with how the audit process will apply.

This is an England led initiative. UKFS was never designed to be an auditable standard: this is being discussed as if it is written into the scheme as a requirement RPA will need to be able to audit it as it is under a grant scheme. This needs to be in sight in the review of this document.

If audits find damage to watercourses or soil as a result of biomass supply, buyers of the wood fuel will have breached rights their subsidies.

NEXT steps:

Group needs to give suggestions as to how it is prepared to engage and then we require focus meetings to look at this in detail.

Key people to be involved in the process should be suggested to Ian.

What are the means of verification? This needs to be made clear along with what weight is being applied to the guidance. This needs to be ascertained for it to be auditable.

UKFS is not overly prescriptive; this is a problem now it is being audited. Laddered approach is similar to the felling licence system; aiming to work with owners where a breach is suspected, so seriousness of the breach can be assessed. There's a need to retain flexibility and room for expert judgement from WOs. The objective is raising standards rather than catching people out. In the laddered approach few cases reach the highest rung, which is a good thing.

9. AOB

It is important that people read the material regarding *Chalara* on SSSIs (Paper 1.2) There have been a number of letters regarding issues with payments for accounts migrating from GLOS to RPA. This is usually a case of two accounts being registered to one SBI, or no attached account. FC is unable to access the system details. Account details will need to be correct after July and this must be addressed in July if any cases are still outstanding.

Andrew Smith announced that he would be moving on to a new post. The Group thanked Andrew for the fantastic job he had done - , bringing a huge depth of knowledge and involvement to the job, and working extremely hard-

Meeting End

Appendix

Table 1: Regional FAF suppliers (overleaf)

Lot	Suppliers	ADAS	Ashfield Farmed Environment Services Ltd	Chris Seabridge & Associates Limited	FWAG South West Limited	Promar International	Reaseheat h College	Ricardo-AEA Ltd	Rural Development Services UK Ltd	SAC Commercial Ltd
8	National	Yes				Yes		Yes		
Regional Lots										
1	North west	Yes				Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes
2	Yorkshire and Humber & North East	Yes				Yes		Yes		Yes
3	East Midlands	Yes	Yes			Yes		Yes		Yes
4	West Midlands	Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes
5	East of England	Yes				Yes		Yes		
6	South East and London	Yes				Yes		Yes	Yes	
7	South West	Yes			Yes	Yes		Yes		