

Agenda Item 7

COMMISSIONERS MEETING

Memo No 18/15

10 December 2015

ENGLAND COUNTRY REPORT, DIRECTOR ENGLAND

Countryside Stewardship

Interest in the Woodland Improvement options has been good and we received more than 250 initial applications from around the country. These have primarily focused on priority habitats and priority species. Many of these applications are particularly important as they bring previously unmanaged woodland into active management. Approximately 40 of these are "mixed" applications and combine woodland with agri-environment options.

Since the last England Country Report, Forestry Commission Woodland Officers and Natural England advisors have been working together to help applicants create the best possible application. The application window for Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier closed on 31 October. 199 of the initial 250 applications we received resulted in a final application. We hope that with more time to improve their applications those initial applications that did not proceed will re-apply next year.

Applications have been scored, ranked and selected and agreements will begin on 1 January 2016. During the week commencing 30 November, Natural England will be informing all successful applicants (including those that applied for Woodland Improvement options and items) that they will be receiving an agreement offer, subject to final eligibility checks, and that they will be sent their full agreement offer as soon as possible. Natural England will issue offers from the beginning of December 2015 through to the end of January 2016. Processing on the Rural Payments System has had to be prioritised to avoid any disruption to this year's BPS payments.

The final version of the Countryside Stewardship handbook, for those whose agreements start on 1 January 2016, has been published on GOV.UK.

Agreements are now being issued for Countryside Stewardship woodland creation, for applications received earlier in the year. We are working to be able to issue the remaining agreements that are currently delayed by Rural Land Registry digitisation or the need for amendments to any pre-existing Environmental Stewardship agreements.

A lot has been achieved in the first year and momentum on woodland creation, woodland improvement and tree health has been maintained between Rural Development Programmes (2007-13 and 2014-20).

This achievement has been hard won in the context of: a paper-based application process dependent on new and developing IT system functionality; changing EU rules; new woodland improvement support with a shift from capital items to multi annual options; bringing together our staff and lessons from Environmental Stewardship and the English Woodland Grant Scheme in to a single scheme; new working arrangements for the transactional processes of Countryside Stewardship with Natural England; delays in guidance, training and forms; and significant pressure and uncertainty for staff and applicants alike. This year is one that we intend, with input from the sector, applicants and staff, to learn from, and to build upon for future years of this Rural Development Programme.

Legacy schemes – payments

The Forestry Commission are currently processing annual claims for 2015/16. Customers have been advised that they may not receive their payments as early as in previous years. Payments will start in December and conclude in February. This is the first year where manual claims have been required for all annual payments (excluding Farm Woodland Scheme) administered by the Forestry Commission. We are currently reviewing the process used in 15/16 to improve and, as far as possible, streamline this for 16/17.

Claims for the second instalment of English Woodland Grant Scheme woodland creation for 15/16, referred to in the previous Report, have now been issued and payments have started.

Forestry Innovation Fund

A £1 million Forestry Innovation Fund (FIF) for England was announced in the March 2015 Budget Statement: *'Fund for Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) supported forestry schemes – The industry led initiative 'Roots to Prosperity' has demonstrated the value of collaboration between the forestry industry, Local Authorities and LEPs. To encourage this further, the government will launch a nationwide £1 million fund to support schemes that will promote the growth of the forestry industry in their region and which have the support of their local LEP.'*

The Government has confirmed that this scheme will go ahead over this and next financial year. The Forestry Minister announced the scheme at the Confor Westminster Conference on 10 November.

The initial phase of the FIF will support the creation of significant areas of new multi-purpose productive woodland that will supply timber, increase natural capital and provide ecosystem services by funding the planning and design of these woodlands. It is hoped that the scheme will open for applications in early December.

Reshaping Forest Services

As detailed in the Reshaping Forest Services consultation response, the administrative hub in Worcester will close in January 2016. A working group has been planning and managing the transition of work from Worcester to Bullers Hill in Exeter for a number of months in preparation for the closure. The group recently facilitated a very positive meeting between field staff based in North West & West Midlands (NWWM) Area and the admin team based at Bullers Hill, at which business processes and file structures were finalised as well as providing an opportunity for the teams to meet each other face to face. All new business for NWWM will be supported by Bullers Hill from 1 December, allowing the team in Worcester to concentrate on completing outstanding enquiries and file transfer and archiving. Communications have been prepared and are planned for imminent release; web and intranet pages will be updated, e-alerts for Agents & Owners will be sent using local and national contact lists and FC internal communications channels will be used to inform staff.

Bristol Office changes

Following a consultation, almost all staff in FC England National Office who provide services in HR and Finance will move into Forest Enterprise England from January 2016.

The transfer of transactional HR Services from Central Services to FC England and FC Scotland is now being implemented. Forest Enterprise England is setting up its own HR Team, with a Head of HR already having been appointed; this team will also provide services to the rest of FC England. FE have appointed a Head of Information Services, and will now start taking forward work on future capability in that area.

The Woodland Policy Enabling Programme team and a small number of other colleagues in the Executive Office and the Communications team will remain in the National Office, due in part to the need to continue managing changes for the whole of FC England.

In response to these changes, and the need to accommodate more staff in Bristol over time, the first floor accommodation in the Bristol Office will be reconfigured. Internal work is due to take place from 11-18 December, and there will inevitably be some disruption during this period.

UKWAS Audit

FEE is on track to retain 'UK Woodland Assurance Standard' (UKWAS) certification following the annual surveillance audit by independent auditors SGS in October 2015.

A significant body of work has been undertaken over the last 12 months, since the audit in October 2014, to address a total of 29 outstanding Minor Corrective Action Requests (CARs) and Observations (Obs). The Planning and Environment function have also developed a new approach to how FEE meets the requirements of UKWAS to ensure that fewer CARs and Obs are raised in future and to improve confidence in FEE's ability to meet the standard. Although the draft report from SGS is still to be received, the indication from the close-out meeting during the field audit is that this new approach has resulted in the close out of almost all existing issues and only a few new CARs and Obs have been raised.

Civil Service Awards

Ben Jones, Tree Health Operations Manager, was named Inspirational Line Manager of the Year at the 2015 Civil Service Awards in November. He was presented with the award at the ceremony at Buckingham Palace.

The awards have 16 categories and attracted 800 nominations, reduced to a shortlist of 47. He was one of three people shortlisted in his category.

Ben's team commented jointly, "We know that Ben Jones is an inspirational manager, and we want others to know. He inspires by being the best at what he does, and he works tirelessly to get the best not only out of his team, but also every individual that he manages".

Grown in Britain Week

Grown in Britain (GiB) Week took place in October, launched by the Secretary of State attending an event at Heals to emphasise the many benefits of buying home-grown timber. Ian Tubby and GiB CEO Dougal Driver appeared on BBC Breakfast to reinforce this message.

During GiB Week, and to mark the National Woodfuel Conference, the Forestry Commission highlighted the results of 'Making Woodlands Work': an online survey of 175 woodland owners, with a detailed focus group of four owners in the South West. The results illustrate how much revenue many landowners are failing to realise by not exploiting the full potential of their woodlands. The story was reported by Farming UK, Pro Arb, Horticulture Week and Farming Monthly National amongst others.

Stick Man Trails on the Public Forest Estate

The Stick Man trails are the latest initiative in conjunction with Magic Light Pictures, following the award winning Gruffalo Forest trails. Based on the much-loved book written by Julia Donaldson and illustrated by Axel Scheffler, the Stick Man trails opened to the public on 28th November 2015 and will run until June 2016. The trails will lead children and families through the forests using activity points which allow them to live the adventures of Stick Man, whilst also learning about the importance of forests for people, wildlife and timber. This year trails will be available across 24 sites in England, a 20% increase on the number of Superworm participating sites in 2014.

The self-led trails are aiming to increase visitor figures to hosting sites by 5% year on year and are forecasting sales of 60,000 activity packs, which will be made available at participating sites at a cost of £3. An increase in Discovery Pass sales (forecast at 5%) and large boosts to the marketing database and social media community are also expected, providing the Forestry Commission with a greater audience for ongoing engagement in the future. Stick Man toys and themed menus will be made available at selected sites.