

Agenda Item 12 COMMISSIONERS MEETING Memo No 16/16

16 June 2016

ENGLAND COUNTRY REPORT, DIRECTOR ENGLAND

Countryside Stewardship

Woodland Creation

A total of 546 hectares of woodland creation was supported by RDPE (Countryside Stewardship and EWGS) in 2015/16. We expect further planting from the 2015 round of Countryside Stewardship applications to be claimed, paid and reported in the first quarter of 2016/17 and later in the year from planting that has been deferred.

The window for final applications for Woodland Creation 2016 closed on 31 May. We received a total of 198 final applications with early indication that the total area will be above 1,500 ha with an increase on the average size and stocking density on the previous year. Although still not as high as we would like we are confident the changes in the processes (for ourselves and the RPA and Natural England) we have and are making will ensure that a greater proportion of these applications will result in timely agreements and ultimately, planting. Our next steps will be to score the applications and proceed with those scoring above the threshold score (and if necessary any 'cut-off' score to match the applications to the available budget), through any remaining consultation to offer agreements.

Our intention is to be able to offer guidance and application forms for 2017 as early as autumn this year in order to allow applicants plenty of time to prepare ahead of the woodland creation application window opening again in early 2017.

Woodland Improvement

The window for initial applications for woodland improvement closed on 31 May. A total of 629 application packs were requested from Natural England Technical Services. A total of 423 initial applications have been received. Of these 252 are for only woodland options (to receive technical input from FC Woodland Officers and Field Managers) and 171 are for woodland options and agri-environment options (so called 'mixed' applications - to receive technical input from FC and NE). This represents a significant increase, when compared to 2015, in the number of applications and the proportion of those applications that are 'mixed'. Woodland Officers will be working with applicants to refine the applications in order to submit final applications by 30 September 2016.

Legacy schemes – payments

The final annual claims for 2015/16 are being processed. This was the first year where manual claims have been required for all annual payments (excluding Farm Woodland Scheme) administered by the Forestry Commission and customers were advised that they may not receive their payments as early as in previous years. Payments started in December and to date 92% of claims have been passed for payments, with the aim to clear the vast majority of any remaining eligible claims by the end of June.

Defra 25 Year Environment Plan

The 25 Year Environment Plan arises from a Conservative party manifesto commitment, "We will work with [the Natural Capital Committee] to develop a 25 Year Environment Plan to restore the UK's biodiversity, and to ensure that both public and private investment in the environment is directed where we need it most." The Secretary of State's ambition is that "in 25 years' time, Britain will be the healthiest and most beautiful place to live, work and bring up a family".

A draft framework for the plan is in production and the structure is described as follows in Defra's departmental plan:

"Defra will work with the Natural Capital Committee to develop a comprehensive 25-year plan for the environment.

This will:

- Help ensure the environment is appropriately maintained and improved so it flourishes and continues to underpin our economic success and wellbeing.
- Develop the structures and tools to draw together economic, social and scientific evidence and provide practical approaches to enable people to value nature systematically and fully when they are making decisions on the ground and to ensure we get the greatest value from both public and private investment.
- Integrate delivery and decision-making on environmental quality by using catchments as the building block, driven by local join-up, Defra's organisational reform and robust action at local level.
- Bring together business, environmental non-governmental organisations and others to deliver improvements to the environment, harnessing people's enthusiasm and connecting people with nature.

Defra will publish a framework for action on the environment in spring 2016. This will set out the scope of the 25-year plan. Defra will develop the plan by the end of 2016.

Delivery of the 25-year plan will be supported by better use of data and technology, including by opening up Defra data for public access and through a more intelligent, risk-based approach to monitoring, regulation and enforcement."

Due to purdah ahead of the EU referendum, the publication of the framework has been delayed. Forest Services is working closely with the team producing the document, as well as the overall project board. The eventual output remains subject to Ministerial decisions. Stakeholder engagement is expected following publication of the framework.

Aerial Surveying Results

The 2016 aerial survey has had a delayed start due to lower than normal spring temperatures resulting in the later flushing of larch and other species. Flights commenced on 4 May in the South West of England and have progressed northwards and eastwards to the Lake District, North Yorkshire and along the South Coast.

No significant areas or new locations of *p. ramorum* symptoms have been observed so far. What has been observed is generally in the vicinity of previously confirmed infection of either rhododendron or larch. Sources of concern include increased evidence of impacts of *d. micans*, and spread of dothistroma needle blight in the west of England.

The survey programme is ongoing with the first round of flights scheduled to conclude by mid-July.

Corporate Natural Capital Accounting

Forest Enterprise England (FEE) has developed the first ever organisation level corporate natural capital account (CNCA). This ground-breaking work is pioneering the way in which natural capital management data is brought together. The CNCA provides a structured and transparent way of quantifying the full value of the services provided by the natural assets in FEE's care and the impact of FEE's management of them. The account reflects both value to the organisation (private value) and wider society (external value), providing a broader perspective compared to traditional financial reporting. The value of the services delivered by the Public Forest Estate is estimated to be £11.5bn. Over 95% of this value is as a result of the benefits it provides to society, for example through recreation and climate regulation.

Simon Hodgson and I presented our draft accounts and the key steps in developing them to the Defra Permanent Secretary and senior colleagues on 24 May. The event was very successful with interesting and constructive discussion with colleagues from across the Defra group. We will publish a summary of the CNCA alongside our formal Annual Report and Accounts as soon as possible after the EU referendum.

STIHL Treetop Walkway at Westonbirt

Unveiled on 26 April by BBC Countryfile presenter Ellie Harrison, the new 13 metre high walkway has transformed the woodland experience at Westonbirt by offering views across the arboretum landscape and enabling visitors to discover more about the 15,000 trees

from above the ground. It is believed to be the longest treetop walkway in the UK at 300 metres long.

The route follows a serpentine path through the trees and along the contours of the site, providing step free access into Silk Wood for people of all abilities, in addition to those using mobility scooters, wheelchairs and pushchairs.

The Friends of Westonbirt Arboretum raised £1.9 million to build the new walkway, which was designed by Glenn Howells Architects. Included in that budget was a significant donation from the forestry machinery manufacturer, Stihl.

In the first month of the treetop walkway being open Westonbirt has seen an unprecedented increase in visitor numbers and income. Visitor numbers were up 25% compared to May 2015 (which was our best May for many years) and net income was up from £50,989 in May 2015 to £94,509 in May 2016. In the first week alone 6000 visitors crossed the walkway. Current estimates indicate that 70% of visitors to the arboretum use the walkway.

The second phase of the project also includes the creation of the Wolfson Tree Management Centre which will improve the way the Forestry Commission manages the Westonbirt tree collection, and will explain to visitors how the trees are cared for and used sustainably. This aspect of the project has been funded by a grant from The Wolfson Foundation and was designed by award winning architect of BBC2 series 'The 100k House' and founder of Invisible Studio, Piers Taylor. The Tree Management Centre has been constructed using timber mostly sourced from the arboretum and includes five 20 metre long timber beams hand cut from Westonbirt trees.

Stick Man

Based on the much-loved book written by Julia Donaldson and illustrated by Axel Scheffler, the Stick Man activity trails opened to the public in late November 2015 at 24 Forestry Commission England sites. Within the first three months of launch sites hosting the trails saw a 9.6% increase in visitor figures (approximately 76,500 visits) year on year for December – February. 34,000 activity packs were sold in the same three month period at a cost of £3, with over 100,000 packs forecast to sell by October 2016.

To date, marketing for the trails has been successful with over 200,000 unique visits to the Stick Man landing webpage and 10,000 new subscribers added to a preschool marketing database. Planned social media activity has reached an audience of 1.8 million since launch. Press coverage for the trails has appeared in The Sun, Waitrose Magazine, regional press and BBC radio.