

Agenda Item 11 COMMISSIONERS MEETING Memo No 28/16

15 December 2016

ENGLAND COUNTRY REPORT, DIRECTOR ENGLAND

Woodland Creation

Woodland Carbon Fund

£19.2 million has been allocated to the Woodland Carbon Fund to support the planting of large scale multi-purpose, UKFS-compliant woodland; funding is sufficient for the creation of 5,000-6,000 ha this Parliament. The Woodland Carbon Fund is designed as a simple, demand-led grant scheme to help ensure that the 11 million trees target is achieved and to visibly demonstrate how, by taking a Natural Capital approach, woodland creation can help to meet Government's future carbon targets alongside delivering other benefits.

Successful applications must exceed 30 hectares and have sought opportunities to improve public access and achieve wider environmental outcomes in line with the UK Forestry Standard.

Countryside Stewardship

A total of 41 hectares of woodland creation was supported by the RDPE (Countryside Stewardship and EWGS) in the second quarter of 2016-2017.

Woodland creation in the second quarter of 2016-17 equals that for the same quarter last year, but some 15,000 additional trees have been planted due to higher stocking densities encouraged by the new Countryside Stewardship scheme. Planting for the most recent season as a whole is low due to a slower rate of uptake of the new grant.

The current status of the target for woodland creation is Amber. The sector's confidence has increased following the Chancellor's announcement regarding legacy and new agreements, but uncertainty about Countryside Stewardship grants beyond the Autumn Statement is affecting landowners' willingness to commit and invest and will continue to reduce and delay woodland creation until further clarity is achieved. The re-opening of the Woodland Creation Planning Grant in September and launch of the Woodland Carbon Fund on 10th November will assist achievement of the target by supporting the delivery of larger woodland creation schemes.

UKWAS Audit

FEE recorded its best ever performance in its audit against the UK Woodland Assurance

Standard (UKWAS), this year hosted by North England FD. All previous issues were closed out and no Major Corrective Action Requests (CARs) were raised. Only three new Minor CARs and eight new Observations were raised during this audit. Plenty of activities also received Commendations, including: our consultation process for forest plans; excellent partnership work on the Kielder Dark Sky project; the Wildlife Management System ensuring excellent compliance on venison handling and the transition to use of non-lead ammunition. The confidence of FEE staff in working within UKWAS criteria was a particular point noted by the auditors. Final details of the full report will be available in the New Year.

The UKWAS Steering Group has been working to revise the standard and submitted version 4 to FSC for approval earlier this year. FSC International however has not approved the standard, stating it does not adequately take into account the FSC's International Generic Indicators. The UKWAS board are seeking further information and advice on how to proceed and FEE will be taking an active part in forth-coming discussions through representation at Steering Group meetings. UKWAS version 3.1 will remain the FSC national forest stewardship standard until UKWAS 4 is revised and approved by FSC International.

Parliamentary Select Committees

Forestry Commission England has provided memoranda to two parliamentary Select Committee inquiries.

The Environmental Audit Committee launched an inquiry into the future of the natural environment after the EU referendum. FCE provided written evidence to the Committee and Richard Greenhous, Director of Forest Services, appeared alongside senior Natural England and Environment Agency officials to give oral evidence relating to: biodiversity; current grants schemes and the impact of devolution; developing our own agri-environment policy; the role of rewilding in conservation and restoration. Now that the oral sessions have closed, the Committee will review the evidence submitted and produce a report for Government recommending further action.

In parallel, the EFRA Committee launched an inquiry into the role of Defra in supporting a thriving forest economy and environment. FCE provided evidence of how effectively Government policies achieve their objectives and how they should be developed in the future. FCE's evidence aligned with the Defra submission to the EFRA Committee.

Peter Freer-Smith and I will provide oral evidence to the committee on the 6th December. It is anticipated that the Committee will focus on woodland creation and the Government's manifesto commitment to plant 11 million trees over the course of the parliament. Minister Coffey will provide evidence to the committee in January 2017.

Land acquisitions by FEE

Significant progress has been made in land acquisitions by FEE in the South and West Districts to re-align land assets between the PFE and the Crown Estate. Over 1,000 hectares of land in the Exmoor National Park, the Blackdown Hills AONB in Somerset, and at Chicksands in Bedfordshire has been converted from leasehold to freehold. New freehold land in Exmoor has been acquired by the PFE in exchange for a similar amount of land at Crowthorne. These acquisitions will see an overall increase in the value and benefits provided by the PFE whilst having minimal impact on the total area of land managed by the Forestry Commission.

Forest Holidays Delamere Application

Forest Holidays have resubmitted a planning application for a site at Delamere Forest following the rejection of, and inquiry into, last year's application. All issues raised by the Planning Inspector from the previous application have been addressed and both FEE and Forest Holidays are optimistic about the resubmission. I attended a pre-committee hearing in Chester earlier in November and the application is due to be considered in January by the West Chester and Cheshire Planning Committee.

The application outlines plans for £20 million investment, including proposals for the redevelopment of the FEE Visitor Centre.

Finance for the Future Awards

FEE entered its work on Natural Capital Accounting to the annual Finance for the Future Award in recognition of its 2015/16 Natural Capital Account. The account 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. FEE is the first organisation to have published an account for the entirety of the landholding managed.

Following a detailed written entry and initial telephone interview, FEE was one of three entries shortlisted for the Award. Simon Hodgson and David Hodson were called to present the Natural Capital Account to a panel of judges and recorded a short interview that was shown at the prestigious Awards Ceremony. Despite being beaten to the Award by the Climate Disclosure Standards Board, FEE received good feedback from the assessors and other nominees and it is very positive that our work is being recognised as innovative and valuable by external organisations.

Moors Valley Awards

Moors Valley Country Park was presented with two gold awards at the Dorset Tourism Awards in October. The attraction, which is jointly managed with East Dorset District Council, won golds in the Access and Inclusivity category and for Sustainable Tourism. These awards recognise the excellent work being carried out at Moors Valley Country Park, which also took silver in the Large Visitor Attraction category of the South West Tourism Awards in February.

Westonbirt Walkway Award

At the prestigious Wood Awards, Westonbirt Arboretum's Stihl sponsored Treetop Walkway scooped the award for the best commercial and leisure project, knocking the National Trust's Mottisfont Abbey welcome building and the acclaimed M5 Gloucester Services into 2nd and 3rd place. The award was a testament to the hard work of FC staff and the Friends of Westonbirt who fundraised for the project over a number of years. Special thanks must go to Sophie Nash, Project Manager.

The judge commended the striking design of the walkway, as well as its educational ability 'to inspire all generations to learn more about wood.'

Grant Fraud Punished

Following a joint FC and RPA referral last year to Defra Investigation Services, Mr Pritesh Ladwa, owner of Forest Project Ltd., was convicted at Birmingham Crown Court at the end of November of fraud in relation to woodland creation grant claims, and sentenced to 2 years and 3 months imprisonment. Chris Grice and Chris Waterfield gave evidence for the Forestry Commission. Civil claims remain outstanding.

Kielder Heritage Grant

Kielder Water and Forest Park Development Trust has secured a £336,300 grant to enhance a number of facilities around Kielder Castle and to explore the diverse natural heritage.

The two-year scheme will include osprey roadshows, food foraging, a young ecologists' club and nature trails across the wider landscape. The project aims to have a lasting legacy thanks to the recruitment of volunteers and Wildlife Ambassadors, improving virtual access to the park, creating new nature hubs and holding an annual wildlife festival.

Forestry Commission is a partner of Kielder Water and Forest Park Development Trust, which has secured the grant as part of a wider National Lottery bid win of £1.3million for the Northumberland region.

Latchmore Brook

The Forestry Commission is a delivery partner for the New Forest Verderers Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme. The scheme includes wetland restoration projects, reversing the artificial drainage that took place in the late 19th and early 20th century. The Latchmore Brook catchment restoration project, the biggest to date, is the subject of a planning application made in July 2016 which was rejected by the National Park's Planning Committee 6-5 on 15 November, going against the recommendation of their officers. The plans had strong support from a wide range of bodies, but faced equally strong opposition from a well-organised and vocal 'friends' group and the local MP Sir Desmond Swayne. Sir Desmond has asked a number of parliamentary questions in relation to these activities and has spoken directly to Ministers, who have received comprehensive briefing.

The FC has 6 months to appeal the decision and will be considering its next steps over the next few weeks, including with its delivery partners. The HLS Board is scheduled to meet in January 2017 and its views will be critical to the decision on the next steps. Without the planned works the condition of Latchmore Brook area (SSSI and SAC) would remain in unfavourable condition and would further deteriorate.

Headley Wood Felling Licence – Threat of Judicial Review

The Forestry Commission issued a felling licence for Headley Wood in Hampshire in June 2016. The landowner began felling at the end of September, at which time neighbouring owners raised concern with the local council because the woodland was subject to a Tree Preservation Order (TPO). Owing to a process error, the Forestry Commission was unable to prove that it had met the legal requirement, where a woodland is subject to a TPO, to notify the local planning authority before issuing the licence. This has led to initiation of a claim for Judicial Review. While correspondence and discussions are continuing with the local authority and the claimants, there is a risk that the claim will be pursued and, if successful, lead to the felling licence being quashed by the court.