

**MINUTES OF THE CUSTOMER REPRESENTATIVES GROUP
MEETING
SILVAN HOUSE, EDINBURGH – 4th FEBRUARY 2016**

Attendees: Douglas Wright FCS (Chair am), Brendan Callaghan FCS (Chair pm), Keith Wishart FCS, James Nott FCS, Keir Smith FCS, Ian Davidson SGRPID, Andrew Midgley Scottish Land and Estates, Peter Jones SRUC, Jamie Farquhar Confor, Jim Colchester Confor, Tim Liddon ICF, Gordon Gray Stephens Community Woodland Association, Mark Hamilton Social Forestry, Robert Patton Highland Council, James Hepburne-Scott RSFS, Rodney Shearer Confor (Nursery Group), Sian Williams LINK

Apologies: Jim Dewar FCS, Tom Davies FCS, Jill Aitken LINK, Grant Murray Confor (Nursery Group), Jonathan Hall NFUS

1. Introduction & Minutes from 17 September 2015

Douglas welcomed everyone to the meeting in particular Rodney Shearer and Sian Williams who have recently joined the Group.

Minutes were accepted as being an accurate account of the meeting.

Members were concerned that there was no NFUS representative.

Action Feb 2016/1: FCS will contact NFUS to request a regular representative

2. Matters Arising:

Action Date	Action	Update or Action agreed at Feb 2016 Meeting
Aug 2014 /1	Explore if there has been any research on mapping of potential abandoned sheep land against land designated as 'preferred' in regional F&W strategies.	FCS has not lost sight of this. There is now discussion with Sheep Association to explore improved integration of farming and forestry
Sept 2015/2	Customers to consider carrying out capital works in 2015 to maximise use of the grant budget. In the event that work was not carried out, FCS will guarantee a claim year variation to 2016.	CRG members raised the importance & urgency of getting woodland creation schemes approved for this planting season. See also 4&5 below. FCS agreed to a) examine clearing process b) stress urgency to staff in getting schemes approved and c) consider communication
Sept/3	FCS will update woodland creation option guidance on tree protection.	Cases where protection costs are high and more than 150% of initial capital planting cost may still be supported where additional benefits are clearly identified. The 150% is not an automatic cut off point. FCS to ensure consistency of interpretation across Conservancies.

2. Update on Prior Notification and Forestry Consultation

Syd House provided an update on Prior Notification and Forestry Consultation. A Prior Notification Briefing Note by FCS is now available which explains the alignment of information for different consenting regimes.

Recommendations for improving forestry consultation have also been published and an implementation plan is being drawn up to take these forward. In particular, this includes improving the Public Register for 2016/2017. Consultation protocols with SNH, SEPA, and Historic Environment are also being taken forward.

3. Forest Plans

3.1 UKFS Interpretation - there are two areas of UKFS guidance that have consistently raised issues between Conservancies and owners/agents. FCS has met with customer representatives to take this forward and will prepare some additional guidance for staff and customers.

- **Species choice**

Guidance will promote the benefits of species choice diversity to steer plans to assessing proposals based upon silvicultural benefits rather than minimal compliance approach. Draft guidance will look at allowing justifications from departing from the UKFS on a site specific basis.

- **2m adjacency guidance for felling coupes**

Guidance will allow for some discretion. In situations where owners cannot meet the 2 metre adjacency eg plant health issues, then justifications will be required on a site specific basis.

3.2 Forest Plan Guidance – a draft copy of the new Forest Plan Guidance was issued and comments on content and layout would be welcome by 24 February. **Action January/2: Members to provide feedback on the draft Forest Plan Guidance to Douglas by 24 February**

4. Woodland Creation Targets and Progress

CRG members raised the issue of getting planting approvals processed as quickly as possible. There is a serious and urgent nursery issue with large stocks of plants in particular broadleaves. To help speed the application process up, FCS is issuing manual contracts for approved applications where the 1st annual recurrent is 2016. This targets the cases most likely to go ahead this spring. Other approved woodland creation applications will receive a 'letter of contract' which allows applicants to get on with operational planning and also to start work. These applications will receive a systems contract in May/June.

FCS issued an update on FGS figures for end of January. This showed that 2100 hectares of woodland creation has been submitted; 845 hectares of this has been approved through the clearing rounds with an additional 6,350 hectares pipeline. CRG agreed that these were encouraging figures for so early in the programme.

With the new FGS up and running, the FCS is now looking at wider issues to stimulate woodland creation activity such as proactive liaison with sheep association and promotional material.

Action 4/1: FCS understood the critical situation facing tree nurseries and took an action to prioritise woodland creation and WIG Restructuring Regeneration approvals.

Action 4/2: FCS agreed to consider a planning grant mechanism as part of a suite of measure to stimulate woodland creation

5. SRDP 2014-2020 Implementation

5.1 On line access to FGS - the online system was down between 1- 28 January which prevented new FGS applications being submitted. This was an unacceptable break in service and FCS complained strongly to RPID and formally wrote to David Barnes.

Progress on the IT does continue to raise concerns. However, FCS has been reassured that the functionality for processing FGS applications and producing contracts will be available in May/June.

Brendan highlighted that due to IT problems that annual recurrent payments will be delayed this year and unlikely to be paid until after May/June 2016.

Action 5/1: CRG members to note that annual recurrent payments will be delayed until after May/June 2016

5.2 Clearing Rounds and Budget - so far there has been clearing rounds in October and December 2015 with one planned on 15 February. There was discussion on the frequency and effectiveness of clearing rounds. FCS agreed to consider the number of clearing rounds and increase number in order to approve woodland creation and WIG Restructuring Regeneration cases more quickly.

Action 5/2: FCS agreed to consider the frequency of clearing rounds in order to approve cases more quickly and relieve the high stock situation in tree nurseries

FCS shared that as the budget availability for WIG Restructuring Regeneration and WIG habitats & species was becoming constrained in 2016 – partly due to strong demand and also due to carry over commitments from the last programme- that the score threshold for these options would now rise from 2 to 4 for 2016 and remain at 2 for 2017.

Action 5/3: FCS will update the clearing round budget table on the web and alert applicants of the change to the score threshold for claim year 2016 for WIG Restructuring Regeneration and WIG Habitats & Species Options

5.3 Restructuring Regeneration – after wide discussion with staff and forestry sector, FCS has made several important changes to this option. The key one is that the grant rate is now decided by the species diversity achieved over the 20 years of the Forest Plan and the required level of diversity at the contract/application level has been set out more clearly.

6. AOB

- Forest Infrastructure – Confor would like more support for forest infrastructure in particular in light of recent major weather incidences that have damaged forest road networks. FCS indicated that Confor would be best to raise this issue directly with the minister.
- Direction of FC – Confor were interested in an update on the future direction of FC. Brendan explained that a number of groups have been set up within the FC to consider how best to decentralise services and how best to support FC in the countries. No decision has been taken how FCS will be organised in the future.
- Woodland Creation and Design – Mark Hamilton raised the issue that mixed conifer and broadleaved woodlands were not well supported under the new FGS compared to the previous programme. FCS agreed that the current options tend not to favour an intimate mixed approach except for the small or farm woodland option and that there is an are cap on this option. However, FCS agreed to consider Marks points.

Action 6/1: Mark Hamilton to provide feedback to Brendan on proposals to improve support for mixed conifer and broadleaved woodlands