

**MINUTES OF THE CUSTOMER REPRESENTATIVES GROUP
MEETING
CAPITAL HOTEL, EDINBURGH –17 NOVEMBER 2016**

Attendees: Brendan Callaghan FCS (Chair), Douglas Wright FCS, Keith Wishart FCS, James Nott FCS, Tom Davies FCS, Anne Gray Scottish Land and Estates, Peter Jones SRUC, Jamie Farquhar Confor, Gary Bolton LINK, Mark Hamilton Social Forestry, Jim Colchester Confor, Gordon Gray Stephens Community Woodland Association, James Hepburne-Scott RSFS, Rodney Shearer Confor (Nursery Group)

Apologies: Jim Dewar FCS, Keir Smith FCS, Jonathan Hall NFUS, Sian Williams LINK, Ian Davidson SGRPID, Alan Farquhar SEPA

1. Introduction & Minutes from 10 June 2016

Brendan welcomed everyone to the meeting. Minutes were accepted as being an accurate account of the meeting.

Action Nov 2016/1: FCS to explore whether Jim Knight would be a replacement for Robert Patton.

2. Matters Arising:

Action Date	Action	Update or Action agreed at Nov 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.	Action Nov 2016/2: FCS to approach Trudi Sharp to identify areas of sheep activity levels.
Feb 2016 4/2	FCS agreed to consider a planning grant mechanism as part of a suite of measure to stimulate woodland creation	FCS is exploring the potential of loans with SG to assist with upfront costs. Agreed that this will be assessed once Jim McKinnon Review is published.
Feb 2016 5/1	CRG members to note that annual recurrent payments will be delayed until after May/June 2016	Some 35-40% of 2015 annual payments are still outstanding as prioritisation of payments was Pillar 1. FCS agreed that current delays were not acceptable. Action Nov 2016/3: FCS to formally escalate to try and avoid similar delays for 2016 payments

2. Jim MacKinnon Review

Report has been received by SG who are awaiting a response from the Minister on how he wants to take things forward. There was discussion on a range issues in relation to approving FGS schemes such as consultee responses, FCS staffing levels, risk averse approach by FCS, public register project, future grant budget and ministerial support for forestry.

FCS expects an improvement on some of these issues once the Jim MacKinnon Review is published.

3. SRDP 2014-2020 Implementation

3.1 FGS Statistics - FCS shared the latest FGS statistics. There is good progress in the growth of applications with over 10 000ha of woodland creation applications having been submitted since opening in April 2015 until the end of October 2016 of which 6,000 ha of woodland creation have been approved. There are also 11,480 ha of pipeline woodland creation.

FCS will publish FGS Statistics regularly on the FCS web pages and provide an annual progress report on woodland creation.

FCS is forecasting a grant underspend in 2016 but with higher levels of woodland creation now coming through there will be increased budget pressure in 2017 with the likelihood of threshold scores increasing for some woodland management options such as WIAT, WIG Restructuring and WIG Habitat and Species.

3.2 Brexit – UK government has now guaranteed that all grant commitments made up to UK leaving the EC will be honoured. With larger woodland creation applications having 1-2 year lead-in time, a critical consideration in order to maintain the momentum for forestry is to seek funding assurances for applications coming forward from late 2017/early 2018 and that are likely to be approved after the anticipated April 2019 exit date from EC.

3.3 IT – the IT Rural Payment System (RPS) supporting FGS is currently a very limited system with the processing and approval of FGS applications including claims being dealt with through a separate FCS casebook management system. This continues to be challenging and labour intensive for FCS staff. Functionality to process and provide contracts through RPS is now over 12 months delayed and is expected to be introduced before Christmas. Functionality to process Claims via RPS is underway.

Jamie Farquhar requested a widening of the current notification practice of just being to the owner (or “responsible person”) to include agents (and multiple agents) and to cover key stages within the application process.

There is a great amount of customer frustration caused by the present arrangements and much time being wasted by agents trying to find out from owners when contracts are being issued and payments being made.

FCS explained that the RP&S system has a communications log and agents can view any case correspondence on this log. This log should contain copies of manual offer letters and manual contracts, but these are not system generated, and are manually prepared and uploaded. Despite requests during the IT development phase, the Customer Registration part of the RP&S system cannot cope with all the possible agent/owner relationships and is designed so that contract correspondence is sent to the responsible person. This is set up by the business (owner) and can be an agent, if the business (owner) wants to set it up that way. Interim

manual FGS processes have to duplicate and follow the way the IT system is set up.

To change this would involve major IT development and is unlikely to be viewed as a priority and may not even be possible, given the pressures on the IT Futures project. However it was agreed that FCS would raise this issue formally with RPID and seek to look at possible alternatives such as manual email alerts especially at the important stage of contract issue.

Action Nov 2016/4: Increasing evidence that current limited notification practice is causing severe customer dissatisfaction and delays to work. FCS will formally contact RPID to seek a widening of notification in particular at contract issue stage.

4. FGS Customer Charter - a draft FGS Customer Charter was presented based on current application process. This does not take account of any recommendations from the Jim MacKinnon Review which is still to be published.

CRG considered that it was not worth finalising the draft until the Jim MacKinnon Review was published.

5. Forest Plans

The recent joint workshops held jointly by FCS and ICF for the launch of the new Long Term Forest Plan guidance were well received and attended. The additional guidance on UK Forestry Standard interpretation for Long Term Forest Plans and the proposed UKFS compliance monitoring were presented and will be finalised shortly. CRG will be consulted in advance of guidance being released.

6. AOB

- EIA (Forestry) Regulations consultation - the consultation on an EC directive to implement changes to EIA (forestry) regulations has now closed and Scottish Government is analysing responses. It is likely that the threshold limit for requiring an EIA for will be increased.
- FC Bulletin 119 – Cultivation of Soils for Forestry revision - Forest Research has been commissioned to review and update Bulletin 119 – Cultivation of Soils for Forestry, which was last published in 1999. The extent of proposed woodland creation, changes in legislation, practice, knowledge and experience imply that this is very timely. CRG representatives from the private sector stressed the need for appropriate consultation and consensus, to generate pragmatic and realistic guidance. It was therefore recommended that a cohort of ICF members will offer assistance to review and contribute to the publication.
- Claim Year – starts from the 1 April and is linked to the calendar year. Claims must be received by end of March.