

**MINUTES OF THE CUSTOMER REPRESENTATIVES GROUP
MEETING
SILVAN HOUSE, EDINBURGH – 29 NOVEMBER 2017**

Attendees: Brendan Callaghan FCS (Chair), Douglas Wright FCS, Keith Wishart FCS, James Nott FCS, Keir Smith FCS, Jamie Farquhar Confor, Mark Hamilton Social Forestry, Jim Colchester Confor, Gordon Gray Stephens Community Woodland Association, Rodney Shearer Confor (Nursery Group), Tom Davies FCS, Anne Gray Scottish Land and Estates, Andrew Vaughn ICF, Peter Jones SRUC, Arina Nagy-Vizitiu Link

Apologies: Jim Dewar FCS, Jonathan Hall NFUS, Ian Davidson SGRPID, Alan Farquhar SEPA, Sian Williams LINK, Jim Knight Scottish Borders Council, James Hepburne-Scott RSFS

1. Introduction & Minutes from 17 August 2017

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

2. Matters Arising

Action Date	Action/Matter arising	Update agreed at November 2017 Meeting
Nov 2016/3	Delays to annual payments – FCS to formally escalate delays to 2016 payments	Been progress with published target payments dates. Notification issues regarding SAF payments with no identification of what it is for. Jamie volunteered to discuss issues with RPID Action Nov 2017/1: Lindsay Bisset to seek clarification from RPID on payment notification
Aug 2017/2	John Dougan's new role in strategic development	Update Action Nov 2017/2: FCS will make announcement regarding staff changes within Silvan House
Nov 2016/5	Notification issues within RP&S, in particular regarding contract issue	RPID will not review the customer registration system at this time, but there will be a new question in FGS applications where applicants can chose another party to receive information (letters/contracts). Action Nov 2017/2: Lindsay Bisset to confirm approach
Aug 2017/4	Considering Forestry Legislation will it also impact on FES? It was asked if they should attend CRG.	FES was invited to the November CRG meeting but unable to attend. There was a request on an update on the organisational changes to FES. Organisational proposals are currently out for consultation and an update will be provided at a future meeting.

3. Draft Ground Preparation Guidance

John Dougan presented the draft cultivation guidance which is aimed at forest practitioners and FCS staff in working out the most appropriate ground preparation technique to cultivate productive woodland creation sites in Scotland. The aim is not for it to replace Bulletin 119 but to provide operational guidance that is generic and that will deal with most sites. It is not prescriptive guidance and considers options with a stepped

decision making process to evaluate the site. FCS will be encouraging staff to use this as a framework for discussion with applicants and the aim is not to kill the plough.

Scottish Land and Estates raised the rule about of not planting areas of peat more than 50cms. This is part of UKFS and small areas can be incorporated as part of the open space allowance.

Action Nov 2017/1: CRG members to send further comments to John Dougan by Friday 15 December

4. Jim Mackinnon Review update

James Nott gave an update on the Mackinnon Review and delivery of main recommendations which aim to make the whole grant application process much clearer.

A key output will be the Woodland Creation Applicants Guide that will take an applicant through the application process. This has now had external comments from the sector and is being finalised and will be launched at joint FCS/ICF seminars in the spring.

Accredited agents - a proposal for how accredited agents would operate has been agreed. It will involve a 2 stage process – the first stage involves accrediting an individual and the second stage identifies the skills on certain activity areas such as Woodland Creation. Assessment will be based on the tracked record of the last two grant applications. There is still a significant amount of work to be done in developing the detail including an appeals process.

EIA cases - Chris Stark has now taken up the new role of leading a central team on supporting sensitive/complex EIA cases to ensure consistency of approach.

Ongoing grant approval - the proposal by Jim MacKinnon for Conservancy approval was not EU compliant and a revised proposal has been submitted to EU for approval.

Skills and Training – a training and competence programme has been developed that sets out the skills and knowledge required for Woodland Officer to perform effectively. The aim is that this could be also be a framework for external users.

Large scale planting pilot – there has been a very positive response from six Local Authorities and John Dougan is following up with more detailed discussion to scope out options.

There was discussion on the topic of commercial forestry with some stakeholders becoming concerned about the focus on commercial forestry. Confor was disappointed that NFUS is not now attending the CRG and made the point that forestry was providing an alternative land use and only plants appropriate land. There was agreement that forestry needed to provide a positive message. However, Gordon Gray Stephens was concerned about some examples of poor practice at a local level and that this can quickly erode any positive message.

Planting targets for conservancies – annual planting amounts have been prepared for Conservancies based on land availability. These will not be hard Conservancy targets and will be used as a management tool to review and monitor progress against the national target.

5. Customer Charter

Lindsay Bisset gave an overview on the Customer Charter. This breaks down the grant application process into a number of stages with time allocations for each. It is recognised that application approval involves good communication between FCS and the applicant.

The main timescale is that FCS will approve 90% of woodland creation application within 13 weeks. For approved or accredited agents this will be 9 weeks.

The CRG welcomed that a charter was now available although a monitoring system is still required to support the management of the charter outputs.

Action Nov 2017/2: CRG members to send further comments to FCS by Friday 15 December

6. FGS Update

4.1 Woodland Creation forecasts

The October clearing round approved £5.9m worth of applications including £4.5m of woodland creation that involved 56 applications covering 890ha. This gives a total of 14787 ha of approved woodland creation since the new FGS opened and is spread across a number of claim years.

2017/18 - The woodland creation planting forecast for 2017/18 is between 7-8k hectares and will depend on approved contracts being implemented.

2018/19 - There is strong interest with current figures (including estimates of pre applications) showing a potential for nearly 16,000 ha. This means that the 10,000 ha target is clearly achievable with potential to deliver more. However this is dependent on the grants budget situation (see 4.2 below).

Woodland Creation data by year in Hectares (20/11/17)

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Pre-application	N/A	500	6730	4470
Submitted not approved	0	758	4201	998
Approved and not paid	0	4326	4961	448
Grant paid	3627	1788	N/A	N/A
FGS sub -total	3627	7,372	15,862	5,916
Forest Enterprise Scotland	1100	900	650	650
Total	4727	8272	16,542	6566

4.2 Budget Position 2018

There are budget pressures building up in 2018/19 due to the strong demand for grants. Having taken stock of the average cost/ha of woodland creation there is a risk of spending the budget but not achieving the 10,000 ha target. To improve the monitoring of the cost of woodland creation it is proposed to partition the woodland creation budget (£40m for 2018/19) into four parts – normal wc cases, expensive wc cases, CSGN cases and natural regeneration cases.

In particular, the level of interest in CSGN is a specific pressure as the cost/ha of CSGN schemes is high. It is clear that it is not possible to sustain approval of the same level of CSGN schemes.

Jamie Farquhar commented that several Confor members had indicated that without the CSGN contribution, schemes they were developing would not proceed and were pressing to maintain the contribution.

Mark Hamilton suggested reviewing boundaries of core and fringe and that core could be reduced in size to cover the more urban areas. This would reduce the area over which CSGNC is paid but would help focus the remaining budget. Mark also suggested revising the scoring to favour more urban schemes or those delivering greater public benefits.

It was agreed that it was preferable to adjust the core and fringe boundaries rather than maintaining current boundaries and limit the level of approved applications. In this way the CSGNC budget would go further.

CRG did request that as much time as possible was given to the sector of any change.

4.3 Confor Nursery Perspectives

Rodney Shearer provided a report that gave an analysis of the nursery situation in UK.

- 9 nurseries are members of Confor Nursery Producers Group (NPG)
- Confor nursery production of broadleaves is greater than current grant approvals
- Confor nursery production of conifers is greater than current grant approvals
- However, restocking without grants is a major market and estimated to be 10,000 ha/yr
- Anticipate a shortfall of veg prop

6. AOB

- Standard cost review – request from Confor that FCS to look at rhododendron control cost. On a separate issue FCS may be required from a recent EU audit to review the costs of some operations. Agreed that FCS would have standard cost review but this would be a 6 month project and there is currently no resource to take this forward.
- Felling licences - Jamie Farquhar raised the issue of de minimis level of species required. Need to be careful on what is being approved and important that FL picks up the species being felled as

there can be queries from the public. FCS does not consider this a big issue.

- Contract amendment – Mark Hamilton raised a query on the flexibility of varying some WIAT 2017 projects into 2019. With the time taken to issue contracts, there is now a tight deadline to get work done this year and 2018 is already committed. FCS will take lead from Conservancy staff on this.
- Deep peat – Anne Gray raised the seeming anomaly of being able to replanting deep peat site but not planting deep peat on new woodland creation sites. Anne was requested to discuss specific cases with local Conservancy. Small areas of deep peat are eligible open ground (see 3 above) but Brendan was willing to consider this further. **Action Nov 2017/3 – Brendan to consider the eligibility of deep peat as open ground.**