

**NOTES & ACTION POINTS FROM CUSTOMER REPRESENTATIVES
GROUP MEETING
TEAMS Video Conference, Wednesday 17 March 2021**

Attendees: Brendan Callaghan SF (Chair), Ian Cowe SF (Secretariat), Charlie Taylor Forestry & Land Scotland, Chris Stark SF, James Nott SF, Tom Davies SF, Keith Wishart SF, Jamie Farquhar Confor, Andrew Vaughan ICF, Gordon Gray Stephens Community Woodland Association, Rodney Shearer Confor (Nursery Group), Duncan Stone NatureScot, Vicki Swales Scottish Environment LINK, Arina Russell Scottish Environment LINK, Jim Colchester Confor, Harry Wilson RSFS, Mark Hamilton Social Forestry, Martin Mackinnon SF, David Hetherington CNPA, Andy Tharme Scottish Borders Council.

Apologies: Keir Smith SF, Karen Ramoo Scottish Land and Estates, Robert Morris SEPA, Malcolm Young SRUC.

1. Previous Meeting Minute and Outstanding Actions

Minute of the November 2020 meeting was accepted with no changes.

Native Woodland – Discussion: new native woodland creation across Scotland is variable, but regional trials and carbon funding are having a positive impact on the rate of planting in some areas. However, with the low national coverage of native woodland cover, is the current BL/Conifer split in new woodland creation suitable and should the formal target of 3-5k per annum increase as the overall WC target grows?

Action: SF Head of Policy and Practice to be invited to a future meeting to lead further discussion. Also consider if:

2. Proposal for FGS Sub-group

BC outlined the rationale for a technical sub-group, the group agreed the need, but asked for:-

- a balance between the work of the subgroup and the main group, so as not to devalue the input and function of the CRG.
- a review of the ToR for the CRG to add governance and reporting expectations for the sub-group.
- consideration of the need for a person specification for sub-group members.

Action: Review the ToR – amending for the addition of the sub-group.

3. FGS Update and Progress Toward WC Targets

FGS Statistics – **BC** summarised the circulated FGS summary statistics, noting:-

- SF remains busy processing applications – 13,000ha of woodland creation contracts have been approved for 2020 against a target of 12,000ha (FGS target 11,500ha).
- Claims to date for 2020 planting total circa 3,500ha.
- It has been a challenging year due to Covid-19, EU Exit labour and supply issues.

DH/VS/GSS – enquired about the possibility of more detail in FGS statistics.

- CSGN data for CNPA

- Greater breakdown of native woodland planting
- LISS/SMF data

Action: Review production of annual summary of planting in addition to monthly summary statistics.

BC outlined Briefing Note 34 – detailing the end of year claims arrangements. **JF** queried if anything could be done to minimise the variation process for those projects that don't complete works by the end of March. **BC** highlighted that SF is trying to maximise planting in 2020 and would encourage as many applicants to complete works within the year to minimise the need for variations.

HW asked if EU Exit provided any opportunity to amend the claim year end. **BC** informed the group that claim years follow the Scottish Government financial year and that our exit from the EU didn't provide any opportunity for change.

AV asked if the clearing schedule can be increased and/or the processing time to be reduced to increase the rate of approvals for 2021 applications. **BC** highlighted that the clearing process is not the barrier to approvals and any change to the clearing process would likely not have any impact. **JN** highlighted that volume of work is the biggest hurdle, and that high quality applications that follow the applicant's guidance will progress most timely through the approval process.

RS provided a summary of the Harvesting & Processing option success in 2020. 60 projects have been funded in Scotland, drawing down £2.1m of grant with a total investment of £5.4m in the Scottish nursery sector. The funds have provided confidence for the sector to invest and expand.

BC hopes to announce a continuation of the programme in 2021 (additional funds) in the next few weeks.

Pause to Applications – **BC** stated that the current pause on new applications to FGS will not be extended past its initial implementation date, it has succeeded in creating space to build up the rate of processing currently submitted work.

Workload Pressures – **AT** expressed concern that LAs are also suffering difficulty in responding to consultations – but that they are working with SF to agree/prioritise work and pilot new processes to become more efficient.

TD thanked the sector for recognising the continued difficulties SF was experiencing with staff working from home. **BC** highlighted additional staff resource has been brought into teams processing WC applications and that SF continues to work to improve the situation.

Urban Woodlands – **MH/VS/GGS/AR/JC** highlighted the value of urban woodlands during the pandemic and asked if the current WIAT/Public Access FGS budgets were sufficient.

Action: Topic for discussion at a future meeting

4. Cultivation Guidance

BC introduced the revised draft of SF Cultivation for upland productive woodland creation sites - Applicant's Guidance MARCH 2021 and additional supporting information.

BC highlighted that the guidance was based on models that were not perfect, but that **SF** was taking the best advice available to inform decisions on actions to ensure environmental standards.

A detailed discussion followed, significant points in summary:-

AV/VS/GGS supported the need for the precautionary approach, but also highlighted the need to implement this change correctly.

AV/JF expressed concern that the introduction of the guidance may reduce the availability of land for **WC**.

MH stated that the sector needed to take on-board the views of stakeholders, and to make best of the guidance, **JC** was in support of following the guidance given the research and science behind the recommendations.

Timescale for Feedback & Release

VS stated the guidance is needed urgently, but **AR/GGS** highlighted a little more time was required for organisational review and that **WC** cases in progress may suffer with an urgent release/introduction.

Action: Any additional comments to **BC** by 24/3/21.

Comments/changes will be reviewed and implemented and further consultation with the **CRG** will be offered before publication of the guidance.

5. Forest Plan Statistics

CS showed projections on the scale and extend of future work relating to Long Term Forest Plans over the next 5 years – the projections show **FGS** applications will need to rise from 50/year at present to over 200/year in 2024/25 – this work will be to renew expiring plans and process new plans.

This is a strategic issue for timber production, both **SF** and the private sector will need to be prepared to resource this increase in activity.

Action: Topic for further discussion at a future meeting

6. A.O.B

- Restocking **NBL** Stocking Density guidance (circulated with meeting papers) – comments to be provided to **CS** as soon as possible.
- Forestry application consultation system – an IT system is in scoping, but there is no overnight solution to this issue.