

**WEST MIDLANDS WOODLAND AND FORESTRY FORUM
MEETING 28TH JUNE 2006
KING'S COURT HOTEL, WARWICKSHIRE**

MINUTES

Attendees:

David Ritchie	Chairman
Claire Robinson	Advantage West Midlands
David Jam	Deer Initiative
Sarah Davis	Department for Health
Mardi MacGregor	English Forest Industries Partnership
Bill Heslegrave	Forestry Commission
Simon West	Forestry Commission
Steve Cresswell	Forestry Commission
Andrew Woods	Forestry Industry Task Group
Paul Cobbing	GOWM
Jo Jury	Heart of England Tourist Board
Stephen Armstrong	National Trust
Sara Roberts	RFF Delivery Plan Manager
Stephanie Wickison	Staffordshire County Council
Peter Rodriguez	Forestry industry
Richard Sochacki	Forestry industry
Judith Webb	Forestry and Timber Association
Ken Simons	Warwickshire County Council
Andrew Sharkey	Woodland Trust
Chris Bray	Worcestershire County Council
Helen Woodman	Worcestershire Wildlife Trust
Julia Hall	Secretary

Apologies:

Andrew Blake	AONB Officers
Judith Leigh	English Heritage
Andrew Heaton	Environment Agency
Ian Hickman	Forest Enterprise
David Howatson	Government Office
Jim Waterson	Harper Adams
Katie Eastaugh	Herefordshire Sustain
Hayley Campbell-Gibbons	Lantra
Corin Crane	Learning & Skills Council
Sarah Faulkner	National Farmers Union
Clive Keble	National Forest
Alan Leather	National Forest
Hugh Devlin	National Trust
Nick Young	Natural England
David Shelley	Ramblers Association
David Ragbourne	Rural Development Service
John Blessington	Shropshire County Council
David Sulman	UK Forest Products Association
Richard Hammersley	
Mike Kinghan	Wildlife Trusts

1. **Welcome and Chair's introduction**

The Chairman welcomed Mardi MacGregor, from EFIP. He also welcomed the presence of a representative from AWM, Claire Robinson.

2. **Minutes of the meeting of 23rd November 2005 and matters arising**

The minutes were agreed as a true record of the last meeting. Judy Walker reported that the health project was not yet completed, but that she would report to the forum on this at a later date. On a similar note, Bill Heslegrave said that it was too early to report progress on the next phase of implementation of the Heartwoods project.

3. **Regional Forestry Framework**

- **2005/06 Delivery Plan review and launch of the 2006/07 Plan**
- **New website and communication plan**

The RFF Action Plan Manager, Sara Roberts, gave a presentation, reviewing the work carried out so far in monitoring the delivery plan and the production of a rolling delivery plan for 2006-9, which was launched at the meeting. This longer-term view would enable the plan to be embedded into the business plan process of organisations.

A summary of the report on the 2005-6 delivery was distributed. Sara explained that a full annual report would be produced. She also asked members to refer to the website and inform her of any comments or improvements that could be made to it.

CDs containing the rolling delivery plan for 2006-9 were distributed.

The Chairman congratulated all those who had contributed to the process and in particular to Sara who provided such an able and energetic lead. He asked how the achievements of the past year were to be celebrated. Sara replied that the annual report would be going to the steering group meeting in July and they would then discuss how to disseminate the information. She had received offers of help from some partners to incorporate it into their publicity campaign for the region.

Action: *Bill Heslegrave to contact the FC's public relations consultants about the possibility of issuing a press release on behalf of the forum.*

The Chairman also felt there was an issue that was mentioned in the Jaakko Poyry study that regions should not only act alone, but should act jointly as well. This had already been voiced at the Defra and Confor-organised meetings on the EFS consultation.

Andrew Woods asked how communications between task groups would be managed for basic issues such as plastic tree guards (industry and recycling concerned). Sara agreed that this would have to be addressed in the future.

- **Progress case studies : Woodland Opportunities Mapping**

Simon West distributed a copy of the composite map, version 1 of which had been launched in Worcester in March. Since then comments had been taken on board to develop a second version which would be launched at the beginning of next year.

A primary aim of the map was to help EWGS woodland creation grant applicants put together a good application, taking into account

sensitivities and opportunities in the area. He noted that the West Midlands was well advanced in development of landscape character assessment, ahead of any other region. It was now felt that the composite map contained too much information so the second version would instead consist of a suite of themed priority maps. Applications received by the FC would be mapped each year to see if the distribution of schemes changed with the availability of the map. Judy Walker and the Chairman commented that this was an excellent piece of work which would be a good start to targeting grants on an assessment of need.

Andrew Woods asked if the budget for the last Woodland Creation Grant judging round had been spent. Steve Cresswell replied that, as applicants had until March 2007 to claim, he was unable to provide a complete answer at this point.

- **Progress case studies : Wood Energy**

Graham Hunt reported that there was now a robust wood energy task group, with a wide membership, from growers to manufacturers. He stated that the FC had been asked to put together a national wood fuel strategy, which would include the delivery of 2 million green tonnes of wood fuel, focussing on unmanaged woodland and in addition to existing production. Defra were considering renewed funding on their Energy Crops Schemes.

Judith Webb explained that at a National level, an increase in private sector activity to achieve this goal was being sought, and that to this end, the traditional firewood market needed to be concentrated on. The FC was looking at how it could help the supply chain, and FE might help as an enabler.

Andrew Woods pointed out that there needed to be a good product value, which was lacking at present. Judith Webb agreed and suggested that worth should be based on calorific value, not wet or dry weight.

4. England Forest Industries Partnership and the Mapping Study of the Woodland and Forest Sector

Mardi MacGregor gave a presentation on the mapping study and distributed the draft report: *“Woodland and Forest Sector in England – A mapping study carried out on behalf of the English Forest Industries Partnership”* by Jaakko Poyry Consulting.

Andrew Woods expressed concern that the private sector was fragile and that if that sector disappeared, the strategies being developed would not be delivered. Mardi replied that she was aware of the need for this to be addressed. She had done some calculations and found that if these businesses lost around 10% of their supply chain from UK timber, it could cause them to become non-viable.

Comments were made that there had to be an incentive to use locally produced wood, and that value need to be added to be competitive. Paul Cobbing commented that the Government Sustainable Procurement Strategy, covering both the public and private sector, had been published

and this would answer some questions. The Government response is awaited on this document.

Bill Heslegrave felt that connections to key organisations in the region had to be made as soon as possible after the final document was published.

It was pointed out that wider economic benefits over and above the timber resource, for example tourism, carbon fixing and biodiversity value, were also looked at in this report.

5. England's Trees, Woods and Forests Consultation

Judith Webb reported that this review document was out for consultation. It was not a re-write, but a review of the strategy to bring it up to date. It was available on the Defra and FC websites. Once the consultation had finished, the new strategy would be drafted and an action / implementation plan would be developed by FC and Natural England, looking at the mechanisms for delivery.

Judith encouraged members to send in individual responses to the consultation, even if they were present at one of the meetings held around the country. She explained that it wasn't necessary to comment on all the questions, but that members should comment on the items they wanted to stay in the strategy as well as the parts they felt strongly against. The closing dates for replies would be 9th August. The first draft of the document would be produced by the end of September and the final document by January.

She explained that further work was needed on how the strategy would fit in with the RFFs, but it was important to recognise that this was not straightforward.

Mardi MacGregor suggested that, as EFIP was putting together a response, it could be made available for members to use as an example if required.

Graham Hunt felt that the review was good as it gave a national framework to support the work of the RFFs, for example, with links to health.

Andrew Woods commented that the original document was ineffective for the private sector as the Woodland Grant Scheme was not aligned with it. He was concerned that EWGS should be modified to deliver the objectives in the review strategy. Judith explained that EWGS would only be a small part of the support package put together to help deliver the strategy.

Action: *Sara Roberts and Bill Heslegrave to consider how a response to the consultation on behalf of the forum could be produced.*

6. Rural Development Plan for England

– process, forestry input and stakeholder engagement.

Paul Cobbing explained that each region had been asked to produce an implementation plan setting out the priorities and mechanisms for delivery of the RDPE regionally. The RDPE contained 4 axes to be delivered against, with axes 1 and 3 being led by RDAs and axis 2 by Natural England, all of which would have FC input. In the West Midlands, the priorities were already in place, with the work being more about delivery of objectives and getting people engaged.

Claire Robinson added that the West Midlands were likely to have a budget of £3.4 million (comparable spending at present is at about £6m).

AWM would not be accepting applications directly, but rather through intermediary organisations. Graham Hunt commented that support for these intermediary organisations was lacking, but Claire Robinson said that there would be appointments for facilitators.

Bill Heslegrave felt that forestry had received a relatively high profile in the national consultation document, but that the sector needed to be realistic as to what could be achieved with the new funding. Priorities and targeting had to be set out clearly but there were clear opportunities, for example for wood fuel. He said that the FC would take a lead for the forestry sector but it was hoped to hold workshops to discuss the detail of the regional implementation plan, probably in the autumn. Judith Webb felt that there needed to be a focus to the workshops and that pre-briefing papers should be sent to attendees to make it a practical exercise.

Mardi MacGregor asked how forestry fitted into the AWM cluster system. Claire Robinson replied that it rather fell between the environmental technologies and sustainable food and farming clusters, but that there were hooks in both. Graham Hunt commented on how the AWM system as currently operated was disadvantageous to forestry.

The new RDPE would start in January 2007, but there were still significant issues outstanding at a national / European level.

Action: *SR to liaise with BH to work out a way that the forum can have some input to the process through the task groups.*

7. Progress reports on :-

- **Health agenda**

Sarah Davis introduced the paper on the regional health strategy that was sent previously to members. She asked members to e-mail comments to Zena Lynch. Bill Heslegrave stated that the FC had some good examples to feed into the consultation, dealing with both physical activity and mental health, for example, Active Woods, Wye Wood Project.

- **Natural England**

See update previously distributed

- **Biodiversity Delivery Plan**

Helen Woodman introduced the paper previously distributed. She reported that the *Landscapes for Living* project had been endorsed by West Midlands Biodiversity Partnership. It would address the health and socio-economic side of biodiversity amongst others and would feed into other strategies. There was a meeting arranged for 3rd July to develop thinking on the content and scope of the Landscapes for Living project.

- **EWGS**

Steve Cresswell introduced the paper on the England Woodland Grant Scheme delivery and targeting in the West Midlands. He pointed out that the public access WIG had poor take up so far but that Woodland Regeneration Grant had already been fully subscribed and therefore closed early. The grant for WIG biodiversity had been well taken up

for the present year, but take-up for next year was low so far. There had been no applications for WIG SSSI to date but work to facilitate applications was ongoing. Most woodland SSSI unfavourable condition in the region was due to deer (with the Churnet Valley as an exception); forestry consultants in liaison with FC were at present trying to generate applications for this fund in the Woolhope and Dinmore priority areas.

Andrew Woods reported that the perception in the private sector was that it was difficult to get grants and expensive to pursue them.

Steve Cresswell felt that the over-subscription of WRG was due to the attractive grant for conversion of conifer plantation to native species and wondered whether the rules could be focused on achieving best practice, as a significant proportion of applications were not the preferred choice, i.e. clearfell to restoration.

Bill Heslegrave said more work was needed on regional targeting. It was felt that there was little incentive for landowners to apply for the public access WIG as only 50% of costs were paid, and the eligibility criteria were too tight. Also, there would be no opportunity to make a return on this activity. There may be scope in future to alter the eligibility rules and increase the % grant contribution.

GH reported that there was also a delay in take-up of the Environmental Stewardship Scheme. Richard Sochacki disagreed with this, and felt that there was a loss of confidence in the FC associated with the closure of WGS, added to increased barriers to eligibility in the new scheme, leading to the disillusionment of landowners / agents.

Steve Cresswell explained that in the past, more money was committed to the grant schemes than was available due to owners / agents applying speculatively for work which might / might not be undertaken. The problems with WGS came about when more grant was claimed than expected. Since then there had been a change to only committing the amount of grant that was available. If owners / agents then did not carry out the work, this money would be lost and unavailable to anyone else.

Sara Roberts pointed out that the Health WIG was not included on the charts, but that there had been a 100% take-up, with more applications than there was money available (£75k).

Judith Webb felt that a real disincentive to the scheme was the fear of cross-compliance problems where access to the woodland was through farmland.

The point was also made that there wasn't enough funding to satisfy potential demand for EWGS.

8. Task Group Reports

Bill Heslegrave reported that the Green Infrastructure Planning Task Group prospectus was in draft form and about to be sent to the steering group for comment.

Action: *WH to provide the prospectus when available.*

Bill Heslegrave told the meeting that the Ancient Woodland Task Group had not progressed as he had wanted due to lack of his capacity primarily

but that much work was still progressing on the ancient woodland front. He would ensure that the group came into play as soon as possible.

9. A.O.B.

The Chairman asked if members would please inform the Secretary regarding their attendance in advance of future meetings.

In the afternoon, Mike Box, land agent at the Ragley Estate, led the group to a PAWs restoration site on Ragley Estate to discuss a range of relevant issues.