**SCOTTISH FORESTRY EXECUTIVE TEAM**

**Minutes**

**27 April 2023, Silvan House, Central Meeting Room 1 and Teams Meeting**

**OFFICIAL - DRAFT**

**SET Attendees:**

Dave Signorini (DS)

Zahid Deen (ZD)

Jonathan Taylor (JT)

Brendan Callaghan (BC)

Alan Hampson (AH)

Helen McKay (HM) – Chief Forester

**Apologies:**

Ross MacHardie (RM)

**Part 1**

The SET meeting’s purpose was to have a focused discussion on woodland creation and the need to agree a collective approach and position amongst the senior team in advance of advising the Cabinet Secretary on this year’s woodland creation out turn/stats. It was also to agree the next steps and actions for the short term (1-2 months) and the medium term to the end of the year that can be presented to the Minister that will demonstrate what we are doing to accelerate and get woodland creation back on track to meet the woodland creation targets.

In addition there is a need to agree how this is reflected in the narrative and communications that we present to Ministers, stakeholders and staff.

Following on from discussions with the Minister and at the SAG (March 23) on woodland creation and sharing an initial forecast of the woodland creation figures for 2022-23 it is clear from the projections that meeting future targets will remain challenging.

The SET discussed the 2022 – 2023 out turn of woodland creation. Whilst the figures are to finalised, it expected that total area will between 7 – 8K hectares. The approval figure for woodland creation schemes was in the region of 11k ha.

The reason for the fall off or slippage between approved schemes and planted/claimed is understood to be around 20%, which is historically above average. The reason for this slippage, although not fully understood, was principally around two areas; a large number of smaller schemes have been postponed/paused due to inflation and the rising costs of materials, such as fencing, resulting in the landowners having find additional funds. A significant number of these schemes will be amongst farmers and landowners planting within their holdings. The second area of slippage is a few unconnected large schemes (i.e. >300ha) which have been delayed, for example due to assignation post probate. The schemes are still viable and are likely to be claimed in future years.

The SET discussed the backlog of work, specifically in processing applications and forest management plans that had built up in the Conservancies, largely due to Covid and diversion caused by Storm Arwen.

The SET agreed the following actions and narrative around the coordination and presentation of this year’s woodland creation statistics.

* A submission would be sent to the Cab Sec around one to two weeks prior to stats release. **Action BC.**
* This would include a clear position on the area and number of schemes approved and an explanation of the fall off/ slippage. We will be taking action to understand the causes of the slippage and how we can work with the sector improve performance. Specifically the reasons for the fall off from approved areas, the likely reaction from the sector and how the future pipeline of woodland creation is presented.
* Develop a more detailed handling plan for before and after announcement, and how it links/times with other major announcements, i.e. Enhancements or Economic Study. **Action BC and SW**
* Clear positive message to staff that they are valued and delivered on approving schemes – a great achievement.
* Explanation of the current demand for woodland creation, the types of woodland coming forward (i.e. trees on farmer, investor led) and we can point to a strong pipeline of applications.
* Need to capture and demonstrate how we are joined up on the allied body of work to address concerns on planting on agricultural land (e.g. prime land), land reform, biodiversity, FGS enhancements etc. **Action: Brendan & Alan.**
* It is vital that the Cab Sec is presented with advice that set out the actions we proposed to take that address the issues in the current year (the slippage) and medium and longer actions to get back on track to meet the targets.
* Prior engagement with SpAds would be decided nearer the time. In addition whether a proactive offer of engagement with the sector would help set the agenda, i.e. the offer of summit. **Action DS**

**Part 2**

The SET recognised that without clear and positive measures to present that show how we get woodland creation back on track there is a risk the Cab Sec may introduce alternative (i.e. external) plans or react to the sector’s claims.

The SET then discussed the core issues around demand for woodland creation and creating the sustainable flow of applications; the processes which support and enable them happen, making it as easy and error free as possible for our staff and applicants; and the skills of our people, how do we support and create the framework for our staff to become better and achieve improved outcomes/outputs.

The points listed below were raised with the aim of addressing the major issues of: understanding the slippage of approved cases; improving the processes around woodland creation; and actions that will support and invest in our staff and the sector’s workforce.

It was noted that many of these actions are already happening and part of day-day work, some are part of the Improvement Programme, and some are new and need further understanding. Given the level of demand for woodland creation, further actions over what is already agreed (i.e. trees on farms, new FGS) was not discussed in detail.

**Summary of actions**

**Addressing the slippage of approved schemes**

* Agree a common understanding of the slippage. Work with the sector to have a clear picture of the drivers in the sector and specifically understand what factors are within Ministers control and those out with. Establish actions that can reduce this slippage back to under long term average (<10%). Actions included looking at changing the rules on variations (number and timing) and charging for this, change succession rules to quicken assignation; up the consequences of not proceeding with an approved scheme.

**Actions to address the short term backlog and what do we do to prevent it happening again and improve processes**

* Improve the quality of the applications, specifically at their first submission. Introduce a firmer and clearer first filter for applications to reduce time spent on revisions.
* Clearer expectations of how much time Conservancy staff should spend helping applicants who are not experienced or submitting poor quality applications.
* Introduce more checklists as a ‘gateway’ to reduce inaccurate applications.
* Explore centralise claims and the SAF processing across Conservancies.
* Explore charging to make a contract variation.
* Introduce a Fast Track (triage) system and syphon off less complicated cases.
* Explore options to fast track applications or taking a risk based / presumed consent style approach.
* Can we manage the future pipeline differently to smooth applications and/or help profile for budget, woodland types and capacity in different regions.

**Actions to invest in our staff:**

* How do we skill up our people and the sector and what does that time line and profile look like?
* Invest in a broad spread of staff training, this needs to be done quickly and may not be perfect.
* Could we pilot training, not all elements of the programme needed for operational staff would need to be ready in order to roll out. Look at all ways of delivery – i.e. current staff, former staff, external providers, on-line.
* Explore organisational design – do our staff need to follow the delivery model we have now in Conservancies?
* Improve capacity, (building on existing L&D and current staffing complement), how to improve retention; explore specialisation of certain roles or functions; scope additional resource especially on non-tech processes; monitor approval times to produce qualitative data.

**Next steps**

* The SET agreed the action should be expanded further, accompanied with information on how do we prioritise, and coordinate these across the organisation? What’s within our control or with the sector?
* Agree what does our internal governance and coordination of woodland creation look like? Work is needed to map out and capture the elements and interdependencies, and then decide where and how the work is taken forward. Decide what is already identified and owned.
* What do we do now and what do we leave for the new FGS scheme in 2026?
* What sits within the IPD and what sits else where as projects or day-to-day.
* Require clear visibility (ownership and decision making) of all aspects of woodland creation and the component parts of the FGS.

April 2023