

Forestry Policy Group Meeting
25 February 2021
14.30 by Webex

Attendance:

DAFM: Minister of State Pippa Hackett, C Hayes (Asst Secretary General), S Dunne, P Kelly, F Moore, A Maguire, A Cunningham, K Coggins, S Maurus, K Collins, J Farrell, C Smith, J Casey, S O'Mahony, S Nutty, C Murphy, J O'Hara (Consultant)

Stakeholders: M McAuley (FII), E McGoff (An Taisce), M Carlin (Coillte), M Boyden (SWAN), D Houlihan (AIFC), Pádraic Fogarty (Irish Wildlife Trust), Peter O'Brien (FII), O Duggan (Birdwatch Ireland), D Whelan (ITGA), V Nally, (IFA), C Douglas (NPWS), S Boland (Irish Rural Link), M Conway (FII), T Ryan (None so Hardy), J Gowran (Woodlands of Ireland), M Moroney (FCI), B Hyde (EPA), B Murphy (FII), T Canning (ACA), P Purser (Pro Silva), N Ni Fhlatharta, (Teagasc), A St Ledger (Environmental Pillar), E Hendrick (COFORD).

Minister Hackett opened the meeting, welcomed all attendees, and thanked them for their attendance. The Minister informed attendees that the meeting would be a shorter session than normal but very focused on Jo O'Hara's report. The Minister outlined the format of the meeting; presentation by JOH followed by feedback from the Minister and feedback and questions from Forestry Policy Group (FPG) members.

1. Presentation by Jo O'Hara on her report - Implementation of the Mackinnon Report into forestry application processes in Ireland

JOH thanked the Minister for inviting her to participate and allowing her the privilege of undertaking the work and thanked all members of the group for engaging with her. As communication is so key JOH began her presentation with a key definition of Forestry 'the craft, science and practice of managing trees for a specified purpose'. She then confirmed her remit and gave an overview of the process undertaken. JOH looked at why forestry is so important and at the different positive ways it can touch lives. She acknowledged that if Forests aren't managed properly it can have the opposite effect, giving examples from Scotland and England of bad and successful Forestry. JOH stated that another reason this work is important is that Ireland has a low base of planting which has been heading in the wrong direction for 14 years. Common themes that were raised among participants were discussed with communications being highlighted as a key area. Must-haves and principles were defined, and a new Project was proposed. This would be based on a Project Management structure; 4 Workstreams, clear accountability and reporting, structured engagement and communications and an agreed timeline. There is overlap between the workstreams and the Project Management team will manage that and drive pace. Each of J. Mackinnon's 23 ways forward are allocated to a workstream and JOH has assigned importance to each item.

JOH proposes a project governance framework; a Project Board, Workstream Chairs of working groups and a Project Manager sitting in the centre coordinating. The workstream groups should consist of stakeholders who must work together.

- Workstream 1 will focus on the Forestry Licensing backlog. This stream will build on progress to date and ramp up and is very important as lack of clear progress in this area will undermine confidence in the other streams.
- Workstream 2 relates to a Shared National Approach and a cross-society vision of the role of trees, woods and forests in Ireland's future. This will need a rigorous approach to evidence and science and de-politicize trees. The FPG will play a key role in this workstream.
- Workstream 3 will concentrate on Organisational Development ensuring that the Forestry Division is fit for the 21st century. The focus will be on DAFM but the Department won't work alone, there will also be attention given to training and skills development.
- Workstream 4 will devote their time to Process and the issue of efficiency and effectiveness of regulation as there currently is a lack of confidence in the balance between the two. The stream will address pre-application meetings which could be transformative and examine the possibility of a pre-approval grant for environmental reports.

JOH proposed that each workstream will have their own scope, objectives, key actions, suggested deliverables and suggested milestones. Each will have a working group with responsible officers, stakeholder engagement, agreed deliverables, milestone dates, KPIs and targets and resourcing.

Although the remit of the report was clear some out of scope issues were raised and these have been included in Annex 4 of her report. JOH concluded her presentation by stating that 'People make it happen' and hopes the changes proposed will help people who care so much to work better together to allow forestry to flourish.



FPG Mackinnon
Implementation Plan

2. Feedback from Minister Hackett

The Minister thanked JOH for her presentation and indicated her approval with the definition of forestry provided, asserting that this is a moment to take stock of where we are and clear our heads of negative feelings towards forestry and pull together for a brighter future for forestry.

The Minister thanked DAFM Staff including newly recruited members of staff and all FPG members who have engaged with JOH. The Minister encouraged all participants to read and absorb the report and think about the contents. The FPG needs to have a role in the implementation of the Mackinnon Report and engagement in the form of suggestions and comments is needed.

The Minister noted progress made to date but recognized that despite the hard work of staff the crisis has not been resolved; there has been an increase in the number of licences approved and more timber has been made available to the sawmills but concerns remain. The project will deal with these concerns and Minister urged members to think about the future of forestry and what we want.

The Minister reiterated that improvements have been made including the launch of phase 2 of the Forestry Licence Viewer which has enhanced public participation. Legislation introduced in the Autumn of 2020 has improved the appeals process making it timelier for applicants and appellants. Appeals are still being submitted as was expected but 73 hearings have been scheduled for March with 4 separate groups hearing appeals. The appeals backlog of 400+ cases should be cleared by June. A lot of landowners have been caught up with appeals, not just heavy industry.

The Minister announced that she intends to adopt the management structure proposed by JOH and draw on the expertise of the FPG members and people external to the Forestry sector who are not direct stakeholders. This will be known as Project Woodland and will have a broader approach to forestry. The Project Board will be chaired by Brendan Gleeson, Secretary General, DAFM. JOH will be a Board member and will remain involved with the process. Jerry Grant, formerly of Irish Water and Sarah O'Shea a governance expert will also join the Board. Colm Hayes, Asst Secretary General, DAFM will act as Project Manager and will coordinate work across the 4 workstreams. Each workstream will be chaired by a person external to DAFM and those appointments are to be announced early next week.

FPG members may participate in a workstream. The Minister will ask for preferences in the coming days and assign accordingly. Each workstream will update the FPG on a quarterly basis and the FPG will hold the project to account. Accountability is very important and the workstreams will be very focused. While there are differences, similarities can be drawn from Scotland; an all government approach, need to embrace multi-functional forestry, the right tree in the right place or no tree in some places. There is a biodiversity emergency and there are forestry targets in the Climate Action Plan. To deliver transformative change we need to focus on how we do things, internal and external communication and interaction between stakeholders and DAFM and stakeholders amongst themselves.

Consultation on a new Forestry Strategy will commence shortly and that will inform the new Forestry Programme. Community issues were raised in the report. The Minister has engaged with Irish Rural Link who will work with communities to discover how we can improve and what they would like from forestry. The Minister hopes it will be a shared endeavour with proactive engagement, based on the understanding that everyone may feel that forestry means something different to them. It may be a complex process but the intention is that everyone will be listened to. The Minister welcomes views, observations and questions and there will be more detailed engagement on FPG involvement.

3. Feedback, Questions and Answers

A general welcome for Project Woodland was expressed by member of the FPG. Minister Hackett and Jo O'Hara clarified the following matters in response to questions from members:

- The report contains no specific timelines because timescales are depended on what is decided to be done, resources and how much time there is available. Without having this information, it is not possible to determine a timescale. Instead, the report provides a raking of the importance of action and the Minister has been advised that timelines should be in place within 6 weeks of the project having been set up.
- Workstreams will decide on key deliverables and timescales for their respective area of work. No further report will be produced.
- Suitability and Land availability will be looked at by the relevant workstream as will the Environmental Report to ensure the safeguarding of habitats and high nature value farmland.
- The potential conflict between DAFM's role as a regulator and promoter of afforestation is best addressed by creating good regulation which promotes good practice. Forestry has a purpose and we define that and promote that purpose and regulate so that standards are met. The challenge is to wear both hats. It is important to be very clear on standards and then promote these. This can't be done by government alone. There needs to be a shared vision so that everyone can promote. The Forestry Commission in Scotland has had to balance that for 100 years.
- A broader sense of forestry and engagement along the lines of a SWOT analysis is required and this will form part of Project Woodland. JOH engaged with FPG members during the drafting of her report and, further engagement will happen going forward. The definition of forestry used in the report is not about the exploitative use of trees, the definition is about managing trees for a purpose and there can be many purposes. If the purpose is not clear, the result is bad forestry. Further discussion is required on the time and effort provided by FPG members. A balance between public sector and voluntary NGOs was worked out in Scotland by government making the process efficient and deliver results.
- In Scotland there has been a phenomenal journey since the 1980s in relation to community engagement. A growth in community forest ownership occurred with some communities using the money made to reinvest in their communities. It has reached the top of Arnstein's ladder of engagement as they have taken over management of their forests. Parts of Glasgow have woods they use for drug rehab and mental health treatment that are managed by community organisations. Community engagement is a massive part of the picture.
- Forests in Scotland are made up of 60% non-native and 40% native trees on average.
- The timing of the new Forestry Programme will also be looked at as part of this project.

Minister Hackett concluded the meeting by announcing that the report would be released on DAFM's website later that day.