



An Roinn Talmhaíochta,
Bia agus Mara
Department of Agriculture,
Food and the Marine

Project Woodland

Project Board Interim Report 1
July 2021



Foreword

Trees are a vital part of Ireland's natural heritage. Ireland needs more of them, with the right trees planted in the right place for the right reason. For a variety of historical reasons, Ireland has a lower level of forest cover than any other European Union country. Paradoxically, this means that Ireland has a special opportunity to improve its natural heritage, by investing in afforestation in a way that is sensitive to its landscape and environment, and that allows citizens to benefit from the unique range of public and private goods offered by it.

Afforestation, well planned and executed, can make a significant contribution to Ireland's climate change mitigation efforts, can enhance biodiversity, improve water quality, provide shade and shelter for farmed animals and amenity opportunities for citizens. Harvested wood products are also essential for climate mitigation. Together they also support economic development and employment creation in rural areas and provide alternatives for fossil fuel-based materials in construction and energy generation.

To maximise this opportunity, Ireland needs a coherent and broadly accepted vision for the development of its forestry sector. It also needs to ensure that its licencing and consent systems operate efficiently and effectively and comply with the highest regulatory and environmental standards. It needs to build a positive narrative so that landowners and farmers view forestry as an attractive and economically viable option that can supplement their farm income.

If these objectives are to be realised, the activities of the public sector bodies involved in regulation, research, education and advice must be aligned and functioning efficiently and effectively. Commercial operators in the sector must ensure that their operations are consistent with the relevant regulatory framework and that they are equipped to submit consent applications of the highest standard.

Building a framework that supports this vision for forestry will require a collaborative approach from all of those with an interest in the sector. It will require stakeholders, even those with differing perspectives, to appreciate the legitimacy of alternative viewpoints, and to come together to build shared vision for the sector.

Project Woodland is a framework for developing the kind of consensus that can build a forestry sector that meets these objectives. This is the first interim report of its Project Board.

Introduction

The Project Board for Project Woodland has met on nine occasions since its establishment in February 2021. This is the first of the interim implementation reports from the Board to be issued to the Minister and to the members of the Forestry Policy Group. It is the Board's intention to produce these bi-monthly.

Since its first meeting, a full-time project manager and a systems analyst have been appointed and are already adding significant value to the project. The project manager is finalising a project charter that will, among other things, lay down an improved framework for communication within the project. The Project Charter is issued alongside this Interim Report..

The Board's work has included meetings with the Working Group Chairs and DAFM leads as a collective, site visits, and more detailed discussions with each Working Group Chair as papers, and in some cases recommendations, have begun to emerge.

The Project Board recognises the recent increase in licencing output and also the effect of the implementation of S.I. 293 on this. It remains essential that all licencing is in full compliance with regulatory requirements. We expect based on discussions with DAFM that licencing will resume to its previous levels from mid-August onwards.

The quality of the papers submitted to this point has been excellent. The Board has examined each of the papers submitted, having spoken to the chairs, and evaluated the recommendations made. Every recommendation was considered in detail, taking into account the views and priorities of sector stakeholders, DAFM, the legal and regulatory framework and the resources and timeframes needed to implement them.

In the context of this exercise, the Board has taken into account any overlap in recommendations coming for each Group, so that the process of implementation is as streamlined and efficient as possible. It will also consider scheduling and prioritisation of actions, and in some instances may need further information, third-party advice, analysis or reflection from the working groups or DAFM.

The purpose of this and future Interim Reports is to give feedback to members of the Working groups across the whole scope of the project, to keep stakeholders apprised of developments, and to make recommendations to the Minister on next steps.

The Board recognises the need for clear communication with the Forest Policy Group and other stakeholders and the wider public on the progress of the recommendations. In that regard it intends to produce regular interim Reports on the implementation of the Project, of which this is the first. It will produce the second and third interim reports in October and December of this year and bi-monthly until the conclusion of the Project. The Project Board is also conscious of the fact that it is the staff of DAFM that will be charged with implementing recommendations that emerge from the Project Woodland project. There is a clear need therefore to fully engage with DAFM to ensure that these recommendations are feasible and practicable and can be implemented within the resources available and/or additional resources subject to submissions and DPER sanction.

The table below records the interim recommendation from each of the Working groups, the initial views of the Project Board and suggested next steps.

The Board has agreed to advance two recommendations immediately:

1. An independent external regulatory review is being commissioned by the Minister by end-July. The tender for procuring the review team will be published on the Government's eTenders website by 30 July.

Both Working Groups 1 and 4 have made recommendations on this issue. Those from Working Group 1 focus, in particular, on more specific elements relating to the 15 KM AA screening and a review of the requirement for a licence for forest management operations such as thinning and forest roads.

The Project Board considers that an external assessment of these elements should be incorporated into the broader regulatory and legal review recommended by Working Group 4, with recommendations on these particular elements to be early deliverables from that exercise. In any event many of the recommendations emerging from across the Working Groups will need to be informed by this exercise.

The new business systems analyst has already commenced a review of processes under the current system, including those related to Appropriate Assessment, to ensure that it functions as effectively as possible. This exercise will continue but will also need to be informed by the outcome of the external regulatory review. The systems analyst will work closely with the external reviewer to ensure that adjustments to the process are consistent with the legal framework.

The Project Board recognises the critical importance of ensuring DAFM's licencing system should comply with the relevant legal framework in so far as the environment, public engagement and other requirements are concerned. Within that framework, DAFM's processes should function in a manner that is as

streamlined, efficient and effective as possible, so that operators can expect applications to be dealt with in a reasonable and predictable timeframe.

An external review team comprising planning, environmental and legal expertise to work will work closely with the systems analyst. Efficiency analysis is the role of the systems analyst. The role of the review team is to advise the systems analyst on potential new efficiencies arising within the regulatory and statutory framework. The external reviewer, which may comprise a team, will be tasked to:

- review the existing statutory framework for the licencing of forestry activities in relation to environmental and public participation obligations, including the Birds and Habitats and EIA Directive and the Aarhus Convention;
- to make recommendations about DAFM's processes and procedures to ensure that they are as streamlined and efficient as possible and meet all of the relevant statutory obligations;
- to consider the legal and procedural arrangements in a sample of other member states in conducting this exercise, and to include in its recommendations any lessons to be learnt from that exercise;
- to include in its assessment specific consideration of the potential for:
 - differentiation between projects having regard to scale, location, and type, having regard to legal and regulatory requirements;

- a single consent, permit, licence or other authorisation, to include planting, felling and other related activities;
 - evaluate the current 15km radius for screening for appropriate assessment, or recommend an alternative objective approach to screening, having regard to the requirements of European Union law.
2. On the critically important work on the development of a shared vision for forestry, the Project Board has already agreed to prioritise the commencement of an effective and inclusive public consultation, and has asked DAFM to engage with the Working Group chair to make that happen within the timescale recommended by Working Group 2. This work has commenced. The main elements of the public and stakeholder engagement process including the current indicative timescale are:

Action	Indicative timescale
Engagement with FGP on principles, scenarios, shared vision and strategy	On-going
Survey of public attitudes to trees, woods and forests	July/August/Sept 2021
DAFM-led bilaterals & coalition building with key stakeholders, other Departments and Agencies and the EU	July 2021- April 2022
National survey of general public	Sept/Oct 2021
Youth Forum	Sept/Oct 2021
Community focus groups – in partnership with Irish rural link – commenced	July / Nov 2021

Deliberative citizen processes at national or regional level	Sept/ Oct 2021
National stakeholder conference	Nov/Dec 2021

Other recommendations are considered in further detail in the tabular presentation below.

Recommendation	Board Commentary	Recommended Next Steps
Working Group 1 – Proposals to deal with backlog of files		
Definition of Backlog	<p>The Board broadly agrees with the definition of the backlog proposed in the paper.</p> <p>However, it understands that a working definition will need to take into account the significantly different timing of Coillte applications, which are submitted infrequently and in large batches due to the number and widespread nature of Coillte’s operations, with recognition that a phased delivery is likely to be more appropriate.</p>	<p>Board recommends that the Working Group considers refining the definition in light of the pattern and nature of Coillte applications whether by number of licences or volume</p>

<p>Files started but not submitted by the applicant should be removed from the definition of applications on hand in order to ensure</p>	<p>The Project Board notes that there are potentially 900 files in this category and agrees with this recommendation.</p> <p>Resolving this issue is central to a clear and reliable baseline of applications on hand.</p>	<p>Board recommends that that DAFM establishes a timetable to identify these files, and that it should revert to the Project Board by end-September with a programme of action and the proposed timetable. The work of the Business Analyst on process review will generate process maps for all licencing process and sub-processes</p>
<p>Dedicated Team on Backlog Response</p>	<p>The Working Group feels that the creation of a dedicated team to deal only with backlog files may have merit in the short to medium term.</p> <p>The Board notes that the Working Group is awaiting feedback from another agency on how this could work.</p> <p>The Board recognises the need to deal with the backlog as a matter of urgency, but also the need to manage the potential tensions between maximising output and ring-fencing resources to deal with older cases.</p> <p>Increased licence output will help to address the backlog, and the exercise to identify and dispose of the</p>	<p>Working Group to report to the Project Board on the outcome of its enquiries with other agencies.</p> <p>DAFM to report to the Project Board by date of next Board Meeting in September on the implementation of the streamlining with clearly defined metrics for the impact this will have on the backlog.</p> <p>DAFM through its systems analyst to finalise baseline licencing figures for work on hand by end-September</p> <p>The triage team which DAFM has deployed to felling licences should be immediately used to similar effect on backlogged roads and afforestation licences</p>

	<p>900 or so files where applications have not been formally submitted may result in a more targeted and less resource intensive mechanism for tackling backlog files in a more targeted way.</p> <p>The Board has noted the recent progress in increasing licencing output from DAFM which is the product of some operational changes to streamline the process and asks DAFM to adopt this streamlining and apply it to all applications as quickly as possible;</p> <p>The Board has also received an update from DAFM on the “triage” process which it has applied to backlog licences and the contribution this will make to reduction in the backlog. The Board considers that the backlog needs to be reduced as quickly as possible, but that there is also a need to ensure that the licencing system as a whole functions effectively and with consistency with respect to all applications</p>	<p>and a report supplied to the Project Board by end-September</p>
<p>15km AA Screening within 4 weeks of PB accepting recommendation</p>	<p>See response in the Introductory text on Pgs. 4-5</p>	<p>An external regulatory review is being commissioned as referred to above which will</p>

<p>Review of requirement for legal consent for thinning and forest roads;</p>		<p>incorporate this question</p>
<p>Review of Existing System for Ecological Assessment refinement</p>	<p>The Board recognises that EU and National judicial decisions have resulted in the need to screen in applications for Appropriate Assessment unless they can be objectively screened out without considering any mitigation</p> <p>The Project Board notes that the process of appropriate assessment has already been accelerated as a result of additional resource deployment and some process streamlining.</p>	<p>Given that this is such a key and time-consuming part of the licencing process, the Project Systems Analyst should continue to assess how the process can be streamlined, without compromising its integrity</p> <p>DAFM should apply the process streamlining currently applicable to some licences across the Board. It should revert to the Project Board with a timetable for this</p> <p>DAFM should provide a report to the Project Board on process improvements by the end of August, and should establish indicative output targets, recognising that each application is different and requires assessment on its own merits</p> <p>The 2 reviews (process and external regulatory) should also consider how this process can be managed most effectively, having due regard to the legal and regulatory framework; Workgroups will be tasked</p>

		to provide inputs on Terms of Reference
Monthly dashboard on applications received	<p>High quality data is essential to monitoring progress on the project and the PB agrees with this recommendation.</p> <p>DAFM already produces a weekly dashboard to monitor and report on outputs. A similar dashboard on a monthly basis is needed to capture and report on inputs and licencing work on hand.</p>	DAFM to finalise the monthly dashboard for publication and circulation to all stakeholders by end-August. The format of the spreadsheet is being discussed with by WG1. The data presented needs to be clarified to ensure it is accurate and outlines the situation clearly & fairly
IFORIS Re-write: Agree Timing	An efficient and effective IT system is the bedrock of any regulatory licencing system. The iForis system is now 15 years old but requires improvement to keep pace with new requirements	The Board requests a report from the systems analyst and DAFM on the current state of iForis and recommendations for the extent and timing of future work. Report to be delivered by end-October

WG 2 – Future Vision for Irish Forestry including new National Forestry Strategy

The WG has recommended a plan for co-creation to development of a new National Vision by end-2021 and new National Forestry Strategy by May 2022	<p>Both the PB and DAFM have prepared a number of papers which have been shared with the Forest Policy Group</p> <p>Main focus has been on discussing and developing options for public and</p>	<p>Minister has agreed the key elements of public and engagement process</p> <p>Irish Rural Link to commence their focus Groups in July</p> <p>DAFM team assigned to</p>
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	<p>wider stakeholder engagement, stakeholder mapping, foundational principles, plausible future scenarios, woodland and forestry objectives and associated value and developing a shared national vision for discussion.</p> <p>Some key areas completed include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft State of Knowledge Assessment for the Woodlands and Forestry Sector • SWOT/PESTLE • Stakeholder mapping • Draft co-creation and engagement plan • Foundational principles and plausible scenarios • Working on first cut of a shared vision. <p>There has been some good early progress and the commissioning by the Minister of Irish Rural Link to engage with Community Groups is very welcome.</p>	<p>Phase 3 of Forest National Strategy</p>
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WG 3 - Organisational Review

Development of a new Customer Charter	The Board welcomes this recommendation and the work on this date. There is significant overlap here with the work of the other WGs in terms of setting targets and deadlines for processing of licences and it's essential that this work is coordinated.	WG to present to draft Charter to the PB once it is clear what efficiencies may be introduced on foot of the work of WG 1 and WG 4
Organisational Development Review	<p>The Board welcomes this proposal and seeks clear Terms of Reference by end-October 2021.</p> <p>It is critically important that DAFM staff are fully engaged in this exercise.</p>	<p>The Project Board notes that WG 3 has set up a sub-group to specifically examine this issue and to present its report by 31st October</p> <p>DAFM should commission an external reviewer by end year, to report by end-April 2022, to have regard to the report of the Working Group and the organisational response to the business analyst output</p>
Training needs analysis:	The Board welcomes this proposal and recommends that it be progressed.	WG 3 has set up a sub-group specifically to examine this issue and to make recommendations for training provision for stakeholders within sector and to present its findings by end Q4, having regard to the report of the Working Group and the organisational response to the business analyst output.

<p>Communications</p>	<p>The Board welcomes the early progress here.</p> <p>DAFM has successfully concluded a call for proposals on foot of the WG’s recommendations. The prompt implementation of this recommendation is very welcome as is the additional funding provided by the Minister. The successful projects will greatly help in communicating the multi-functional benefits of forestry not just to critical stakeholders and potential growers, but across society generally.</p> <p>The Board recognises that Communications issues in forestry and woodland management are much broader than the scope of this project. Long-term improvement will require greater engagement across the sector and stakeholder community – beyond the role of DAFM.</p> <p>If this project is to succeed it will require better communications between all stakeholders. The Board calls on all FPG members and wider stakeholders to engage outside the formal structures of the Project with each other, with</p>	<p>Minister has finalised successful applicants calls for promotion and announced €1.4m in funding DAFM is working to engage a communications specialist to support Project Woodland, and in particular the communication of a vision for the sector, by end-Q3.</p>
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	Communities and the wider public, and also with relevant State bodies and with the EU institutions. Developments at EU level particularly on the new EU forest strategy are key to shaping Irish forestry policy.	
WG 4 – Process Review		
Environmental Report and Associated Grant	In principle the Board accepts the merits of this idea, but there may be State Aid or other legal barriers to the provision of a grant to meet statutory requirements.	DAFM will complete a legal analysis of the proposal to be completed by end-October. DAFM to consider opportunities to simplify the report and grant structure.
End to end Legal Review	The Board accepts this recommendation as articulated in the introductory text on pgs 4-5	A tender for such a review incorporating the legal analysis is being published before 30 July. Clear Terms of Reference will be agreed by the Board
End to End Process Review	This work is already underway through the work of the systems analyst. It needs to be aligned with the process review	Included within the scope of the external regulatory review
Pre-Applications Consultations	The Board considers that a pre-application consultation is likely to help improve the quality of	The Board recommends that the Working Group should consider how examples of best practice

	<p>applications and increase the overall efficiency of the licencing system. It should also help in preventing unsuitable applications being submitted. The Board agrees that any such consultation should be advisory only and cannot compromise the independence of the regulatory and environmental assessment required once an application has been received.</p> <p>Any plan in this area will need to strike the balance between operational efficiencies and not impacting on licencing output in the short-term given the backlog and priorities there.</p>	<p>in other regulatory bodies in Ireland or in other jurisdictions deliver this, with a view to preparing a report for the Project Board by Year end following the External Regulatory and Process Reviews</p> <p>DAFM intends to develop a draft framework for developing a system by Q2 2022. This should include consideration of options for use of Teagasc advisory service, for example</p>
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