

**Forestry Policy Group Meeting**  
**23<sup>rd</sup> June 2022**  
**14:30 by Webex**

**Attendance:**

**DAFM:** Minister of State Pippa Hackett, B Gleeson (Secretary General), C Hayes (Asst Secretary General), B Delany (Director of Forestry), P Kelly, S Hona, A Maguire, J Farrell, M O'Neill, B Cruise, S O'Mahony, D O'Rourke, S Dunne, F Moore, G Izabelle

**Chairs of Project Woodland Working Groups:** M Layde, T Hennessy, M Cantwell

**Stakeholders:** M McAuley (FII), B Murphy (FII), M Conway (FII), J Fleming (IFA), M Carlin (Coillte), D Houlihan (AIFC), A Dunne (ACA), N Ni Fhlatharta, (Teagasc), D Whelan (ITGA), J Roche (NPWS), , T Ryan (None so Hardy), M Boyden (SWAN), M Moroney (FCI), K O'Donoghue (FOCS), N Sweetman (IFO), E McGoff (An Taisce)

**Presenting:** Alice Whitaker (Philip Lee)  
Robert Windle (DAFM)

**Apologies:** P Purser (Pro Silva), M Crowe (Chair)

**Minister Hackett opened the meeting, welcomed all attendees, including the Chairs of the Project Woodland (PW) Working Groups (WGs). Minister Hackett:**

- Advised that the Project Board (PB) had received final draft of the Regulatory Review.
- Project Board (PB) have tasked the Department with drawing up and submitting an action plan for implementation of Alice's recommendations.
- Thanked the Chairs of each of the working groups for the achievements to date.
- Provided update on licencing – at 94% of year to date target. Resources will continue to be adjusted where needed in order to deliver on projections. Acknowledged there is ground to make up in relation to afforestation but beginning to see an uplift due to extra ecology resources and is confident will meet afforestation targets.
- Progress is being made on the number of licence applications on hand with numbers reducing from just over 6,000 files last August to just over 3,000 files now.
- Sanction has been received from DPER to commence payment of Environmental Report Grant this year as part of the Afforestation 1<sup>st</sup> grant.
- Frost scheme closed on 31<sup>st</sup> May with 393 applications received which will now be examined and processed.

**Presentation by Brendan Gleeson, Secretary General, DAFM, Chair of Project Board (PB), Project Woodland. B Gleeson noted:**

- Advised that the PB has met 27 times since the Project's inception and a lot of work had been done.
- Thanked Alice Whitaker for her work on the regulatory review.
- WG1 and WG4 have submitted papers in relation to the review and PB will meet with them very soon.
- A time bound action plan for DAFM will be devised to implement the recommendations for the report.
- Outlined progress of working groups and noted that the Taoiseach has made strong intervention on the future of forestry in Ireland.

- Sarah O Shea's contract with PB has expired and she was thanked for her work. Matt Crowe will replace her on the PB and also remain as WG Chair. A new Project Manager is on the point of being appointed.
- Work is ongoing with business analysis and agile IT to improve processes and systems.
- Commented on future direction of Project Woodland.

### **Presentation by Alice Whitaker, Philip Lee and Associates**

Alice has submitted a final draft of regulatory review report to PB. Further engagement with WGs and further research have fed into final report.

Her research suggests that the main challenges in terms of the regulatory framework are the volume of applications that the department has received that require specialist ecological assessment which has been driven by a number of things including the afforestation programme, the relatively high volume of small scale projects and most particularly the introduction of revised screening procedures in 2019 which substantially increased the proportion of applications that required a full appropriate assessment.

In her report Alice Whitaker from Philip Lee Consultants has made over 20 recommendations in relation to the licensing system. They range from things the Department can do, can't do and should consider doing. These are the main points that were addressed by the regulatory review:

- The first two recommendations are trying to reduce the number of applications that have to go to ecology for full AA where the only reason they are being referred there is because there is a condition to be attached to the licence requiring the licensee to comply with no go zones or buffer areas around water courses. Regulation of the no-go zones could be regulated and mandatory with different setbacks depending on the site. These setbacks would inform the screening process for every afforestation and felling licence application but relying on them would not trigger requirement for a full AA unless there are specific issues with the site.
- The report does not recommend the removal of the 15km screening radius for applications as it is felt that this would not offer any improvement to the existing processes and procedure, and it risks insufficient data being gathered in sensitive areas.
- The report recommends the introduction of reasonable time limits for decisions on licence applications but that these time limits should be made extendable on prior notice, giving reasons.
- The report stresses the importance of avoiding default scenarios being applied to time limits as there cannot be a default granting of licences, only default refusals.
- Moving towards a plan led approach and building on DAFM document "Indicative Forestry Statement (2008)" is also recommended. This would involve using a spatial mapping process with criteria to define areas which may be suitable or not suitable for forestry. Therefore, applications for lands deemed suitable following AA and SEA should benefit from faster decision making and more certainty.
- The report recommends looking at calibrating the licensing system according to risk whereby lower risk activities might require a permit rather than a licence. This would allow resources to be allocated to where they are most needed. There is a huge range of views as to what activities are high or low risk and this will require a lot of further engagement.

- The report does not recommend the exemption of Thinning as it is not permissible under EU law. It is recommended that consideration is given to whether a risk-based approach could be applied to certain categories of thinning.
- The report does not recommend the exemption of Forest Roads but forest roads applications should be considered in parallel with any associated application for afforestation/felling/thinning to ensure that foresters can carry out road development when required and again a risk-based approach should also be looked at here.
- The report does not recommend a single integrated licence for all forest activities be introduced due to complicating regulatory issues.
- Does recommend the consideration of a forest management planning approach for larger forests and at the option of foresters who have the resources. This would require more active monitoring by DAFM.
- Recommending that there should be provisions to adopt emergency response standards and plans that would allow emergency situations to be dealt with without obtaining a prior licence, appropriate assessment or screening once they comply with the plan.
- In relation to training it is recommended that DAFM keep up to date with EU Regulatory Framework in order to assist Inspectors and other decision makers to carry out their duties

The report has included some suggested amendments to the Forestry Act. A time bound action plan will be drawn up for DAFM to implement the recommendations of this report. The final report, detailing all of the recommendations in full, will be published soon and a technical briefing will also take place.



Philip  
Lee\_FPG\_Presentation

### **Presentation by Michael Cantwell, Chair of Working Group 1 - Reducing the Backlog, Project Woodland**

- Objectives of WG1 are to reduce the current backlog of all types of licence to an acceptable level, whilst ensuring that regulatory standards are maintained and to ensure that any future growth of a backlog is identified and managed expeditiously.
- The Group have met on 27 occasions.
- Key issues in progress include the response to the Regulatory Review, licencing output and future work.
- He gave an overview of WG1's response to the Regulatory Review which was drafted by Seppi Hona.
- Backlog now down to 2,498 dropping from just under 5,200 in July 2021 which is a significant drop but not as fast as they would like.
- Future Work – develop a monitoring tool for anticipating a build-up of a back log, this is in progress.
- WG1 are in the process of developing a recommendation to DAFM on licence prioritisation which will involve each member of the committee going back to their people for their recommendations.

- He finished with a number of questions which can be seen on the slide, some have already been answered today and others remain outstanding, and the Minister advised we would get answers to those.



WG1\_FPG\_Presentation\_23.06.22.pdf

### **Presentation by Fergus Moore, Member of Working Group 2- A Shared National Approach, Project Woodland.**

- Acknowledged all the hard work of the members of the group.
- SWOT and Pestle analysis, state of knowledge report and Vision scenario carried out.
- There has been 6 strands of public consultation carried out. Public Attitudes survey, Irish Rural Link report have lots of useful insights and will help to inform the first draft of the forestry strategy.
- Vast majority of Bi Lateral consultations with wide ranging stakeholders have concluded over the last few weeks.
- Online consultation received over 3000 responses to the survey. Report is in the process of being prepared for publication. Overwhelming support for vision for forests in Ireland.
- A deliberative dialogue was carried out for the first time on Forestry and will also be published online.
- Broad acceptance of the Draft Vision 2050.
- Starting to write the strategy over the last few weeks with 5 overarching values, Forests for Climate, Wood, People, Nature and Economy that will deliver the strategy.
- Forestry programme will be the key driver for implementing the strategy. Statutory and public consultation on both these will be carried out.



WG2\_FPG\_Presentation\_23.06.22.pdf

### **Presentation by Robert Windle, DAFM on Forestry Programme 2023 -2027**

- Under PW new forest strategy for Ireland will be drafted under WG2 which will support the right tree in the right place for the right reason with the right management
- He also outlined the drivers of the Strategy and Programme, listed the 3 high level goals of the strategy which are outlined in the slides below
- The forestry programme will consist of 8 proposed interventions to address the 3 high level goals, these are also listed in the slides
- It was identified that rebranding from GPC's was required and a new list of these Forest Types are shown in the slides
- Next steps timeline outlined in the slides also.



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### **Presentation by Professor Thia Hennessy, Chair of Working Group 3, Organisational Development and Communications, Project Woodland.**

- Auxilia have been appointed as consultant for Training Needs Analysis (TNA). The contract is for 8 weeks.
- Organisational Review is gone out for tender and it is expected that a consultant will be appointed by September.
- In late April a Communications workshop was held in Oakpark and feedback from this has been taken on board by Meg Laffan and her team is in the process of redrafting the Communications Strategy and draft should be ready by late July but it can't be completely finalised until the Shared Vision is.
- Website has been reviewed.
- Less progress has been made in the review of Coford, Teagasc and Coillte waiting to see what structure will follow PW. They will revisit the mapping of the roles of each of the organisations.
- Draft Customer Charter ready to go but still awaiting details on timelines which is the most important part of the Charter.



WG3\_FPG\_Presentation\_23.06.22.pdf

### **Presentation by Michael Layde, Chair of Working Group 4 - Process Improvement, Project Woodland.**

- Business Process Analysis and complementary systems analysis reports have generated a number of recommendations and DAFM have set up an Agile Implementation Group to implement these recommendations.
- Presentation was given by Alice Whittaker on the Regulatory Review to WG4 who have prepared a report including 9 recommendations which have been sent to the PB.
- Pre-Application Discussions pilot phase has now concluded and to be rolled out Nationally.
- Environment Report/Grant – Department is proceeding with a version of this scheme which involves payment of the grant at Form 2 stage and WG4 maintains it should be paid earlier.
- Longer Term Solutions – Genuine concern in WG4 over the pace of process and not having a clear idea of the projectory of the work of PW and what actions are going to be taken and when.



WG4\_FPG\_Presentation\_23.06.22.pdf

### **Action Points arising:**

- Regulatory Review to be circulated
- Technical Briefing in relation to Regulatory Review to take place with those who have wider forestry interest possibly including journalists and politicians
- PB to meet with WG1 & WG4 in relation to the Regulatory Review

Minister Hackett concluded the meeting by thanking all participants, acknowledging the huge amount of work that has been done by all.