



Request for forestry stakeholder feedback on proposals for the Forestry Commission Wales' First Steps scheme.

Background:

New woodland creation and management of existing woodlands is often a low priority for many land owners, particularly farmers, many of whom have not been attracted to existing or previous woodland grant and agri-environment schemes. The Better Woodlands for Wales (BWW) scheme is designed to support long-term, sustainable woodland management. However, it is accepted that it may be too big a leap for many landowners that may wish to create small areas of new woodland or carry out some simple protection or management of their existing woodlands.

Woodlands for Wales, the Welsh Assembly Government's vision for woodlands and trees in Wales, states, *Woodlands and trees are the foundation to support all the other themes of Woodlands for Wales. Their nature, quality, distribution and management underpins the whole strategy, and we have identified six key outcomes to strengthen this foundation and ensure that it will be fit to meet the needs of Wales for the next 50 years:*

- *More woodlands and trees are managed sustainably.*
- *Woodland ecosystems are healthy and resilient.*
- *Woodlands are better adapted to deliver a full range of benefits.*
- *Woodland cover in Wales increases.*
- *The management of woodland and trees is more closely related to that of other land uses.*
- *Urban woodlands and trees deliver a full range of benefits.*

The First Steps scheme is intended to act a starting point for realising these outcomes through engagement with landowners that may be willing to undertake small-scale woodland creation and protect and enhance their existing woodlands. Under First Steps we expect to enthuse landowners to take the next step into woodland creation and management through woodland and agri-environment schemes.

Previous small-scale woodland creation and management schemes and pilots:

FCW has piloted or run various small-scale tree planting and woodland management schemes in the past and is keen to learn lessons from these in designing the First Steps scheme.

Shelterwoods:

Shelterwoods was run by FCW and formed a pilot to BWW, using the agent/planner approach. Farmers liked the hands-on approach, with much of the otherwise daunting work of identifying suitable locations to plant shelterbelts being carried out by the agent/planner. However, planting success was not always good, as there was little

appreciation that the planting money also included an element for maintenance and after care, despite FCW paying further advisor's fees to allow them to make two to three follow up visits to assist with planting and some aftercare.

First Steps Pilots:

FCW's First Steps scheme has been piloted twice using Coed Cymru as an external delivery partner, firstly in 2006 and again in late 2007. On both occasions, Coed Cymru delivered the scheme using two different administrative platforms. The initial trial allowed for a wide range of tree planting and woodland management activities and was administered using Coed Cymru's administrative systems. The second First Steps scheme was for woodland management only and was administered by Coed Cymru using the BWW system.

According to feedback from beneficiaries of the initial First Steps pilot, it was well received, highlighting that:

- The rules were simple.
- A scheme could be agreed on the spot and confirmed in writing soon after.
- They knew the timescales, 'use it or lose it'.
- Planning, confirmation and execution followed on quickly. This was considered important, as many lose interest if the process is protracted.
- Close involvement of the Woodland Officer in the schemes was an advantage when new clients are involved. Time spent teaching good planting technique and aftercare was seen as time well spent.
- A scheme that produced lots of finished projects and contented clients was good for morale.
- The administration and payments process was straightforward and transparent.

Objectives of the First Steps scheme:

1. To contribute to meeting the visions of Woodlands for Wales, especially 1500ha of new woodland over the next 3 years (of which 1000ha is native woodland).
2. To encourage woodland owners, especially those who have not previously managed their woodlands, to undertake some preparatory steps, so that it may generate enthusiasm to bring their woodlands into more active management through BWW or other agri-environment schemes in the future.
3. A commitment to the continued aftercare of newly planted woodlands to ensure their long-term survival.
4. To raise awareness of woodland creation and further woodland management opportunities.
5. To promote the Better Woodlands for Wales scheme, including BWW Smallwoods, and any successor woodland grant scheme.

Indicators of success:

- How many owners take part, i.e. actually undertake the work agreed.
- Whether they become enthusiastic about managing their woodlands in future.
- What proportion of them subsequently go on to enter the BWW scheme.

Request for stakeholder feedback:

Stakeholder feedback on proposals for the First Steps scheme is welcome. Below is a table that lays out the scheme criteria, some questions and a column for you to insert your responses and comments.

Please return responses to kevin.taylor@forestry.gsi.gov.uk and cc alison.evans@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

The closing date for responses is Friday 19th February 2010.

First Steps Questionnaire

Eligibility			
Criteria	Questions		Response/Additional Comments
Open to all beneficiaries, except BWW beneficiaries, on land in Wales	Is there a justification for restricting the First Steps scheme to a more discreet set of beneficiaries? If so, who and why?	Are there any other eligibility criteria that should be considered?	Presumably this is current BWW holders? This would need to exclude parcels of land for which there was a current BWW (as this would constitute double funding) but what about other parcels of land? Would First Steps be allowed or should this be dealt with as an extension of the BWW? Maybe favour the latter as the management planning of BWW should give better continuity than First Steps. Should keep potential beneficiaries as wide as possible
Must have land registered and a CRN before entering the scheme			This may restrict entry into the scheme as obtaining a CRN number is a significant burden if you don't already have one. Clear guidance on the types of land that can be registered for a CRN number will be required. This is particularly relevant to community groups who may be interested in planting up brownfield, scrub, bracken and other non-agricultural land.
Beneficiary must keep Public Rights of Way open, with necessary furniture supplied and maintained at own cost			What about permissive paths? Any mention of access agreements? It is the landowner who should maintain furniture on public rights of way.

Double funding is not permissible			A necessary provision but take care that it does not restrict entry into BWW – say within the 10 year contract of First Steps? There should be a clear options and choices menu for those seeking funding to know knock on effects
Woodlands that are newly created and/or stock excluded under First Steps must be declared on the Single Application Form, where one is submitted to the Welsh Assembly Government			Included in Farm plan? As with many grants ownership consent should be clear.
Grants will not be approved retrospectively – i.e. for work already done.			A standard provision
Beneficiary must meet statutory legal requirements			Is this intended to exclude payment for owners legal liabilities e.g. cutting back overhanging trees, maintaining public footpaths? Habitat regulations? Or is this to cover other legal requirements such as formally constituted group? This needs some clarity.
Beneficiary must meet cross compliance requirements			This could give some example – although the principle is evident.
No dumping and existing rubbish must be cleared			As it is unlikely that visits take place in all cases, potentially useful to include request for before and after evidence of activity
Beneficiary must demonstrate they have the consent of the landowner			Standard clause for third party applications such as from a community group planting on Council land, local school etc.. Might also be needed for tenants?

<p>If location of scheme is likely to socially, visually or ecologically sensitive then the relevant stakeholder(s) should be consulted before the scheme is given approval.</p>			<p>This would probably be assessed on the site visit with some evidence of follow-up. Even small scraps of neglected farm woodland can be of great value to other users who may wish to be consulted or informed of planned changes.</p>
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New Planting			
Criteria	Questions		Response/Additional Comments
<p>0.05 – 1ha sensitive areas as per the Forestry EIA sensitive area definitions 0.05 - 2ha non sensitive areas as per the Forestry EIA sensitive area definitions</p>	<p>Should woodland creation be 'targeted' under First Steps and, if so, where and how?</p>	<p>Are there any other additional criteria that you feel could be added to the existing – what are they and why?</p>	<p>Targeting new woodland creation would only really be possible using a landscape level (catchment perhaps) planning process. This would be an innovative and interesting way of applying forest landscape restoration principles.</p>
<p>Min area 0.05 ha per individual woodland block.</p>			
<p>Minimum width = 5 metres</p>			<p>This makes clear that not looking at hedgerow creation, but larger scale.</p>
<p>Improved land only (as per EIA agricultural definition)</p>			<p>Would BWW therefore be needed for non-improved land? Would it not be easier to persuade farmers to plant non-improved than improved land? Also these small grants will be attractive to community groups and others who can access non-agricultural land (e.g. brownfield) or rough grazing, scrub etc.</p>
<p>No Short Rotation Coppice/Short Rotation Forestry</p>			<p>Presumably industrial production of biomass – not traditional forms of coppice?</p>

Planting design as per <i>Creation of Small Woodlands on Farms</i> – Forestry Commission Scotland (2006)			This advice is most relevant to farmers – what about community gardens, schools etc ? Schools groups in particular would be interested in the small scale nature of First Steps funding so useful to provide design advice for non-farm woodlands especially when larger trees are to be used as in urban planting schemes.
New native woodland @ a minimum 1600 trees per hectare			But stress that this is a minimum density and not the ideal density which should be determined by the objectives of plantings – e.g. higher densities are needed to maximise biomass production of hardwoods. Minimum for conifers?
Must be planted and maintained to achieve 1600 trees/ha at year 10			On improved land achieving 1600 trees/ha from a planting at this density (100% survival) will require weeding and other planned maintenance work. Would this not be better served by a longer term commitment to funding and management? And would this move the scheme closer to a BWW? Probably useful to state minimum period over which planting should take place, and that this is in the lifecycle of the grant scheme.
Species mixture – at least 75% site native, up to 25% non-site native			Provenance of native trees? Climate change adaptation? Can understand desire to avoid ornamental/exotic planting, but for some sites there may be limited native species due to previous land use so 'preference for native species sympathetic to site' may be appropriate.

Planted trees must be protected from damage from livestock, squirrels, deer and rabbits.			Could be difficult to achieve without maintenance payments. Indication should be given of measures being taken to allow trees to develop, such as pest control, guards, site inspection.
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Existing Woodlands		
Criteria	Questions	Response/Additional Comments
Minimum area = 0.05 hectares		
No minimum width	Should we stipulate a minimum width?	Yes unless you want this to be used for hedgerow maintenance – use 5 m as for new plantings?
No maximum woodland area		Unlimited size might undermine BWW by allowing one off management payments? A ceiling would be appropriate – perhaps 2 ha as for new plantings?
Predominantly broadleaved woodlands are eligible	Should this criterion be broadened to include all woodland types? If so, why?	Yes should include all woodland types including scrub, conifers, parkland and wood pasture (e.g. hawthorn 'savannah'). All woodland types are useful, valued by people and need management. Presumably one aim is to expand biodiversity so useful to broaden – noting need to be sympathetic to local environment.
PAWS woodlands are eligible		Implying only conversion to native species is allowed on conifer sites. Not sure this is what is wanted – conifers are here, are useful trees and appreciated by many people. What people like to see is mature woodland of varied species with big trees with little distinction between conifers and broadleaves.
Woodland must be at least 20% canopy cover		Difficult to determine especially for young stands where canopy closure is incomplete and for areas of natural regeneration which can be diffuse. Also excludes management of 'hawthorn savannah'

		<p>which is a traditional and grossly under-managed wood pasture system.</p> <p>If this rule is combined with the area rule then it should be possible to define an area of 0.05 ha around a single mature tree with 20% canopy cover which could be fenced for natural regeneration or to preserve the health of the tree. This would be a good strategy for encouraging naturalistic spread of woodland from relict trees and also provide for management of veteran trees identified in the Ancient Tree Hunt.</p>
Must exclude grazing from livestock		<p>At tree or area level? What about situations where grazing is used as a management tool e.g. use of cattle/pigs to scarify for natural regeneration? Controlled grazing – allied to tree protection measures would be a sensible management regime in some cases.</p>
A Felling License must be obtained prior to claiming any grant for fencing		<p>This seems very odd? Can't see when this might apply unless its to repair fences taken down to facilitate access for felling.</p>
	What additional operations might be considered?	<p>Should enhance rather than detract from landscape – no unsightly plantings next to houses.</p> <p>Public access? Maintaining amenity views may also be important.</p>

Funding		
Criteria	Question	Response/Additional Comments
Maximum £5000.00 per beneficiary		Ok this will limit the amount of work that can be done using this grant but this will still buy quite a lot of fencing etc..
Minimum value agreement = £100.00	FCW would not consider lowering this threshold, but is there a justification to raise it?	Unlikely that many applicants would go through process for this minimum level but keeping it low does allow for small scale applications.
Annual agreement		What does this mean – if agreement is only for one year how can you secure the 1600 trees per ha in year ten? Or is it that the grant has to be spent in one year? Or does this imply that an applicant could get £5000 a year for different operations or blocks?
Tree planting = One off capital grant of £1800.00 per hectare		To include tree protection, plants and labour? What about follow-up maintenance operations?
Fencing = One off capital grant of £1.75 per metre Gates = £125.00 Stiles = £38.00		Paths? Drains? Clearance of non-native invasive plants? (Rhododendron, Japanese knotweed, Himalayan balsam) Squirrel control? Useful to have some broad categories such as site clearance, site preparation, protective measures

Additional Stakeholder Comments

This grant scheme has been purposely drawn up to be attractive to farmers as a simple grant to encourage them to plant or maintain farm woodlands. However, there are many other people and groups who are increasingly interested in planting trees. Enquiries to FCW suggest that this is the only small scale grant under consideration and that it is open to all and applicable to any land which could be recognised and registered by WAG as a 'parcel of land' including brownfield and other peri-urban sites. If this is the case and it is the intention of WAG/FCW to facilitate the contribution of community groups and people other than farmers to the national tree planting target then this needs careful consideration and re-formulation of a few of the features of First Steps.

- 1) Clear guidance on who can apply for First Steps funding – at the moment it seems to be directed at land-owning farmers. Advice targeted at community groups looking to plant trees or manage woodland would be necessary.
- 2) Clear guidance on the type of land that can be included – make this as broad as possible with caveats where required on conservation habitats and in areas of particular landscape sensitivity etc..
- 3) Guidance on the types of woodland that can be grant-aided by First Steps – ideally it should include native, broadleaved and conifer woodland at a range of densities. Low density 'wooded land' and isolated trees are a vulnerable and neglected element of the landscape and First Steps could perhaps be used to explore ways in which these can be brought under more sympathetic management.
- 4) Acknowledgement that CRN registration may be a significant barrier (it is onerous, requires detailed maps and generally requires mediation by a knowledgeable agent for those without prior experience with this – it is done by Woodland Planners on BWW applications) to some applicants and perhaps some provision to assist groups with this.
- 5) Guidance on the range of silvicultural options that can be grant aided –especially the promotion of natural regeneration, protection of isolated mature trees, the creation and maintenance of small scale firewood and timber resources and the creation of amenity woodlands perhaps using larger planting stock in more urban settings. This may mean a range of advisors with different knowledge and experience will be required as the First Steps trials suggests success is closely linked to face-to-face advice given on site.
- 6) Careful consideration of the maintenance costs and planning required to achieve stocking targets at year 10 from a

one-off planting grant. In many respects this looks like a return to the WGS system except that even this had provision for maintenance payments in year 5 of a 10 year contract. Surely even planting this small would be better served by a scaled back BWW-style plan so someone has to take responsibility for the future maintenance of the trees and understand from the start that this requires a modicum of planning and funding. The reasoning is that First Steps is to encourage a commitment to aftercare and entry to BWW then the links between First Steps and BWW need to be carefully laid out.

- 7) Consideration of the implications of putting the grant out to a single external management agency. Different types of applicant will need tailored skill sets in the advisors – can a single agency provide this and might it be best to have different providers package and deliver the scheme to different stakeholders? There are many models for delivery of such a grant but drawing from the Coed Cymru trials it appears the main advantage of their approach was site visits by a knowledgeable woodland officer who could assist with on-site design of the scheme and provide one-on-one training in planting and aftercare techniques. Presumably the costs of providing this service is borne by WAG/FCW rather than the grant recipient and probably came to the equivalent of one man-day? For community groups, in more socially complex situations there may need to be a greater investment in time to work with the group and also with surrounding stakeholders to ensure the scheme is understood and supported by all concerned. Many community groups are more familiar with Environment Wales or local volunteer centres (WCVA) as sources of funding than the Forestry Commission or agencies that work with farmers; likewise farmers are perhaps not so familiar with third sector agencies. There is a case to be made for having delivery of the scheme through a range of partners if the intention is to attract the widest range of nascent tree planters. One option might be to delivery part of the scheme through Environment Wales and add specialist woodland development officers to the Environment Wales mix. Llais y Goedwig would be willing to assist develop proposals for such a scheme based on members experience with different funding options for small scale planting. There may also be lessons here from the Breathing Places campaign and similar schemes to encourage community involvement in wildlife and woodlands. First Steps could be a important complement to initiatives such as that being planned by WCVA to engage non-green groups in green activities which could involve planting trees and protecting local woodland.
- 8) Community groups often undertake more activities in woodlands than just minimum stocking or farm-style stock exclusion and for this they need additional funding. It would help groups to realise their funding needs if First Steps can be kept as 'clean' WAG money to facilitate its use as match funding with EU grant schemes.