Summary report on review of evidence underpinning grey squirrel policy in England

From **20/12/2013** to **24/01/2014**, Forestry Commission England ran a consultation entitled *'Evidence for grey squirrel policy in England'*. This report covers the online element of the consultation process, which was run from http://englandconsult.forestry.gov.uk/forest-services/grey-squirrel-policy-in-england

Background

In November 2013, the Forestry Commission, with support from Defra and Natural England, was asked to review the approach to grey squirrels in England's woodlands. A consultation on the evidence underpinning current policy was published in December 2013. The consultation closed on 24 January 2014. A stakeholder workshop was held in support of the consultation and explored some of the emerging issues in more detail.

136 consultation responses were submitted on line, 40% of those were made on behalf of large businesses or organisations rather than individuals.

The workshop was attended by 23 representatives of 18 different organisations. See Annex 1 for details.

In support of this consultation The Royal Forestry Society conducted a survey of its members and the report from that survey has been submitted as supporting evidence to the review. Both the Country Land and Business Association (CLA) and the Confederation of Forest Industries (ConFor) encouraged their members to respond to the Royal Forestry Society (RFS) and to the Forestry Commission consultations.

The workshop and additional comments from the consultation said that a strong, clear policy framework will help with delivery of policy aims. Our current policy documentation should be redrafted to set out the rationale for population control of grey squirrels in woodland and be more direct on good practice.

All stakeholders welcomed the opportunity to review the policy and hoped it would result in a renewed call for action.

The workshop brought together a wide range of stakeholders who shared ideas and spoke openly about their desired policy direction in a constructive manner setting a solid platform for further collaboration.

Analysis and commentary on the online consultation data

1. Control Methods – type, costs and efficacy

We asked about the use of different control methods, their cost and their efficacy. See tables 1 and 2.

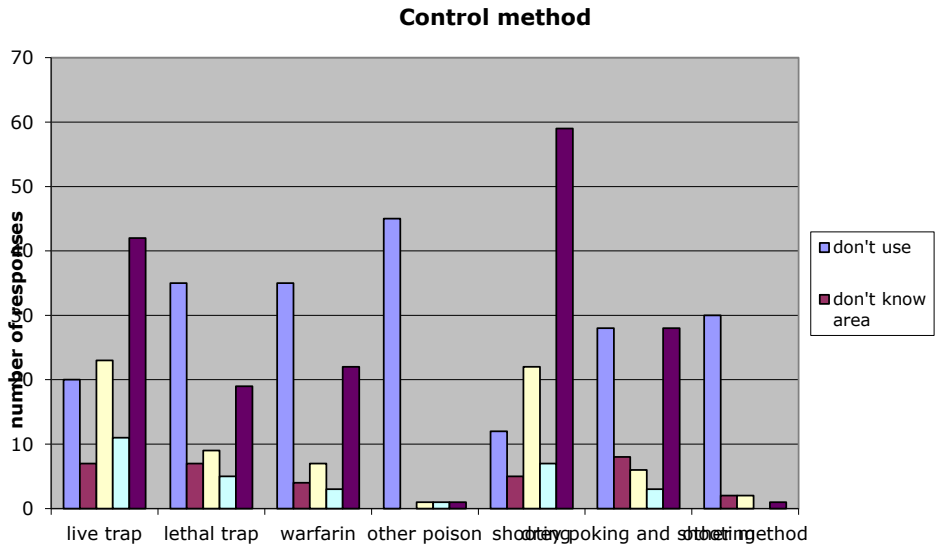

Table 1 Control Methods by area of operation in Hectares (ha)

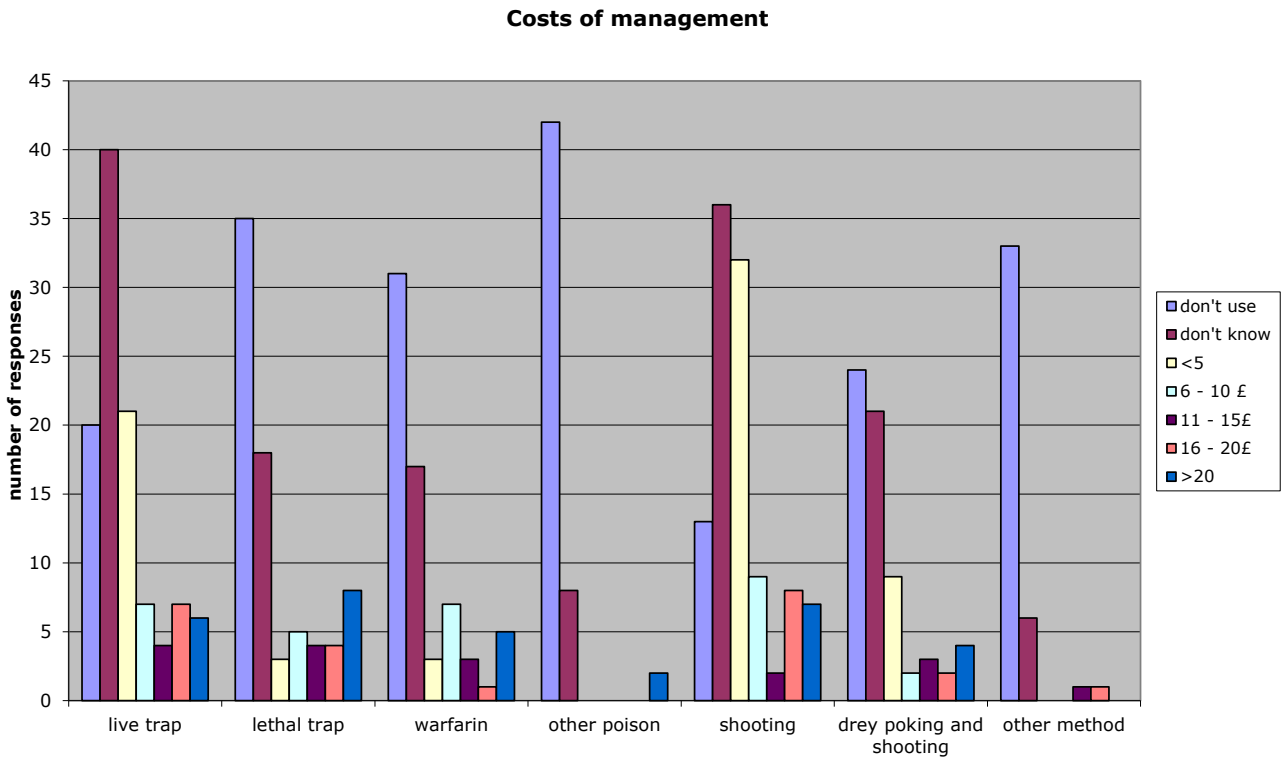

Table 2 Cost of management

The great majority of respondents use shooting (68%) and live trapping (61%) as a control method, often in combination; followed by lethal traps (29%) and Warfarin poison (26%).
Combination methods were considered most effective (eg trapping followed by shooting later in the year) but all control methods were used exclusively in some cases, shooting alone was only used by 5% of respondents.

Costs were very varied within each method, (see table 2) shooting usually being cheapest but live trapping also being presented as a low cost option in many cases. The workshop suggested that live trapping could be low cost where existing staff resource could be used to monitor traps. Many respondents did not know or did not report what their control was costing them.

We asked about efficacy of methods: 53% of respondents considered combination methods were most effective particularly live trapping followed by shooting. Shooting alone was rarely considered effective at controlling populations of grey squirrels or limiting damage to trees.

All available management tools to control greys are being employed by woodland managers. The workshop attendees suggested that the policy should be more specific about best/ good practice, making recommendations about most effective control methods.

Additional methods of control are being researched, we asked for people's views on what should be investigated further. Fertility control was the most frequently mentioned research area (27%) followed by scale of intervention needed to have an impact (13%).

We asked whether people's woodland management choices had been affected by the presence of grey squirrels. 44% of respondents said they had altered the tree species they had planted but an equal number said they had no or low impact on their woodland management choices. When asked about the impact of grey squirrels on management objectives responses varied from none as they were managing for game to significant as they were managing to conserve red squirrels or to produce timber and had suffered significant losses due to bark stripping.

2. Grant aid

We asked whether grey squirrel control should be a pre-requisite for government woodland grant funding. 84% of respondents said yes to this, however when we explored this issue in more depth at the workshop, explaining the implications of conditionality and requirements for verification within the Rural Development Programme, a more refined response emerged.

All agreed that the current targeting of government funding for grey squirrel control to protect existing red populations was the right approach and should be maintained but they would like to see that approach rolled out and made available more widely.

Stakeholders concerned with conservation of red squirrels and production of quality timber agreed that receipt of any grant aid for woodland management should require the recipient to undertake grey squirrel control and that there should be parity between the funding available within grants for deer management and for grey squirrel management.

Stakeholders with a broader conservation remit raised concerns about a requirement to control grey squirrels as part of grant aid leading to fragmented control action in woods, where as concentrated action has been shown to be more effective. Stakeholders with a broader conservation remit and those primarily interested in raising game birds were also concerned that a grey squirrel control requirement would act as a barrier to uptake of woodland management more generally.

We asked about the importance of grant aid to their grey squirrel control effort, 64% of respondents said it was important or very important, 36% saying it was unimportant. We also asked whether respondents currently in receipt of grant aid would continue their grey squirrel control activities in various % cost scenarios. 70% said they would still continue with no grant aid available.

3. Biodiversity impacts

We asked about the impact of grey squirrels on biodiversity including on red squirrels.

All agreed that the principal threat to red squirrel populations in England is the impact of non-native grey squirrels and should be a policy priority. As mentioned above the focus of grant aid for grey squirrel control to support red squirrel populations was supported by all stakeholders.

The case for control to support red squirrel recovery is well documented however current evidence of a more general impact on biodiversity is inconclusive, weak and often anecdotal. Many respondents support the view that grey squirrels are causing woodland bird population declines. This was countered by others citing extensive research that has been carried out by many specialists, one study by British Trust for Ornithology used long-term data sets to test for any correlations between numbers of raptors, corvids and grey squirrels and numbers of 29 songbird species (Newson et al. 2010). There was little evidence suggesting widespread impact of avian and grey squirrel predation on songbirds and the study largely exonerates crows and grey squirrels from songbird declines. There is evidence of some local impacts on some species such as hawfinch.

Of the respondents agreeing that grey squirrel presence has an impact on their woodland management choices, most said that they affected the choice of species to plant, with not planting beech and oak most commonly cited which long term, if widespread, could have impacts on wildlife associated with these tree species.

Some respondents suggested that there were biodiversity benefits from grey squirrels including the production of dead wood in our woodlands and them being a source of food for raptors.

4. Co-ordination and collaboration

We asked about the effectiveness of the current co-ordination of red conservation. 96% of respondents thought that the current coordination efforts by Red Squirrels Northern England, local control groups and others were effective. The workshop highlighted the important role of the dedicated project officers in generating that success.

The impact of neighbouring inaction on people's own grey squirrel control efforts was highlighted in consultation responses as was the impact of the public's perception of control activity. The majority of collaborative action for grey squirrel control happens in and around existing red squirrel populations (76%).

Public response to culling activity	**% of responses**
Blank	44
Concern	17
Disruption (including vandalism)	4
Support	34

Table 3 reported public response to culling activity

Collaboration was explored in more detail at the stakeholder workshop. We asked for specific feedback on the role of government in collaboration, the suggestions included:

- Government funded collaboration groups with dedicated staff
- Establish a compelling case for action supported by modelling of grey squirrel impacts if we do nothing to control grey squirrel. People acting for reds and greys alone have different motivations and will respond to different drivers.
- Organisation in place and funded to make collaboration happen and monitors outcomes
- Ensure policy and regulatory framework that supports and encourages collaboration
- Facilitate production of a grey squirrel accord to which partners can sign up to agreed actions

5. Research

We asked how stakeholders kept up to date with research and what suggestions they had for further research relating to grey squirrel control.

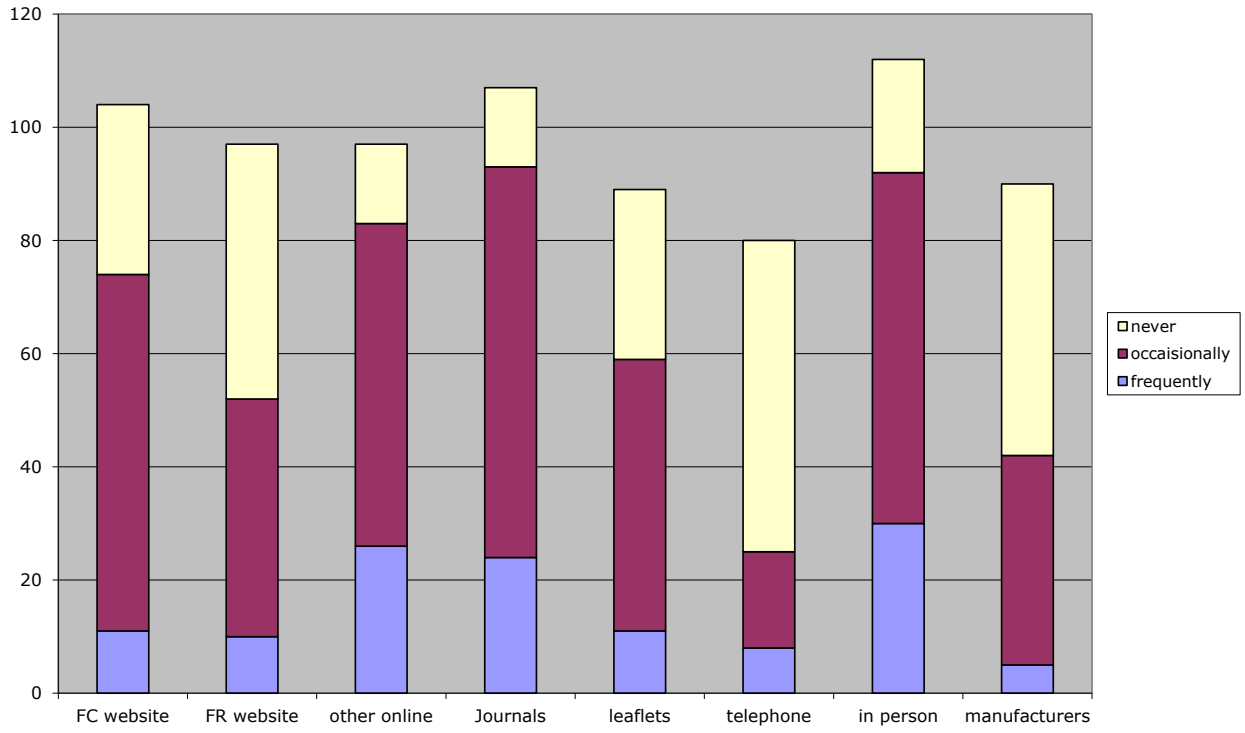

Table 4 Sources of information and frequency of access

75% of respondents hadn't consulted any recent research themselves to help them select or improve their grey squirrel control techniques. The most popular sources of advice were journals and in person advice but even those were mostly accessed occasionally.

Many avenues for research on control methods were suggested – all of which are currently under investigation or have been investigated to some extent. A significant number of respondents thought that we had sufficient control methods, that had been proven to work effectively and greater emphasis should be placed on correct application of control methods. Another issue highlighted by this part of the consultation was that isolated action was considered to be less effective due to invasion of animals from neighbouring uncontrolled areas.

Competitor species eg pine martens
Fertility control
New forms of lethal traps, requiring less monitoring
New forms of live traps (only catch grey squirrels)
Better understanding of the scale, location and timing of action required to control populations
More effective poisons

Table 5 Areas for research on control methods

One area on which there is little evidence but a rising concern about is the potential impact of shoot management (pheasant rearing) on grey populations by providing

accessible extra winter food. The impact on control efficacy and squirrel damage in woods with game bird rearing needs further investigation.

6. The public forest estate

We asked to what extent people look to the Public Forest Estate (PFE) for guidance and demonstration of best practice in grey squirrel control. 64% of respondents either don't look to the PFE, or think the PFE is not demonstrating best practice. 36% think the PFE is or should demonstrate best practice.

	% respondents
PFE does demonstrate best practice	23
PFE does not demonstrate best practice	25
PFE should demonstrate best practice	13
Don't look to PFE	39

Table 6 Best practice and the Public Forest Estate.

7. Legislation

We asked whether a legal requirement to control grey squirrels would be more effective than voluntary measures. This was an issue that polarised stakeholders. 44% saying regulation was necessary to get others to act or to highlight the issue, 44% saying it would be too costly to regulate, or voluntary measures are more effective. 12% said we should enforce the current legislation (recently removed from the statute books) requiring land owners to report sightings of grey squirrels on their land. This view was primarily held by those acting in red squirrel areas and knowledge about presence or grey squirrels is essential to success of these projects.

It was suggested that regulation underpins policy and incentives and generates effort. It also helps co-ordinate action. Concern was also raised over how it would be paid for.

8. Other issues

Consideration must be given how to co-ordinate action across borders (Wales and Scotland) acknowledging that this is a devolved policy area and the legislative and incentive regimes are different across Great Britain.

Annex 1
Organisations represented at the stakeholder workshop 23 January 2014.

Forestry Commission
European Squirrel Initiative
Royal Forestry Society
Woodland Trust
Confederation of Forest Industries
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
Red Squirrel Survival Trust
Duchy of Cornwall
Country Land and Business Association
Red Squirrels Northern England
Forest Research
Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust
National Trust
Defra
Sussex University
Pryor and Rickett Silviculture
1 Independent person