Scoring criteria and clearing process

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Introduction

The following guidance explains how we will assess Forestry Grant Scheme applications using the scoring criteria and the clearing process.

Scoring criteria

All forestry applications will be assessed by Scottish Forestry using option specific scoring criteria.

Scottish Forestry will use the information provided in your application and will score each option based upon how well it meets the scoring criteria. The option-specific scoring criteria guidance explains which criteria will be applied and how your application will be scored.

Each option within your application must meet the threshold score to be considered for approval. Woodland creation applications must score a minimum of one point against each scoring criteria except for additional benefit. The score will then be used as the basis for allocating funding on a competitive basis through the Forestry Grant Scheme clearing process.

Scoring criteria

• Delivery of option benefits (up to 5 points)

Delivering specified benefits that are relevant to the option in question.

• Scale of delivery (up to 5 points)

Assessing the scale at which an activity is being proposed and how well that delivers the objectives for the option.

• Delivering better quality (up to 5 points)

Recognising applications that deliver a greater contribution to Scottish Government objectives by improving on the minimum standards/eligibility requirements for the activities described, or referred to, in the option guidance.

• Delivery of good practice (up to 5 points)

Assessing the methods and work practices you employ when these help to reduce potential adverse impacts to the environment.

• Value for money (up to 10 points)

For Woodland Creation options, we will assess the value for money that your application offers.

Supplementary point

• Additional benefit (1 point)

Recognising the delivery of other specified benefits that have not already been considered within the scoring criteria.

Clearing process and budget management

The aim of the Forestry Grant Scheme clearing process is to ensure that contracts are awarded on a competitive basis and that the highest quality projects are supported from the available budget.

In line with Scottish Government policy and Scottish Rural Development Programme priorities, the annual Forestry Grant Scheme budget will be divided between a series of budget categories. The budget categories and the Forestry Grant Scheme grant options they include are shown in the document below.

The clearing process will then involve applications being compared against the uncommitted budget (headroom) available in the relevant budget category. Scottish Forestry will highlight the availability of grant funds using a traffic light system of green, amber and red as indicated in the document.

For most grant types this will be on a monthly basis, but for some it will be on an annual basis as indicated in the document. The frequency of clearing rounds may be varied in the future, in response to application volumes or the availability of funding.

As a result of the McKinnon Review, we are introducing a ‘pre-approval’ clearing process for woodland creation cases below £250,000 grant value.

The ‘pre-approval’ clearing process allows Conservancies to approve woodland creation cases that score very highly, thereby improving the approval time as these cases will not have to wait until the next monthly clearing round.

The ‘pre-approval’ score will be set higher than the normal monthly threshold score so as to allow the best cases to have contracts issued quicker.

The pre-approval score will be reviewed regularly and the pre-approval process will only operate where there is good budget headroom of at least three times the average monthly approval value for that budget category.



Budget categories table 2025 (PDF, Size: 189.6 kB)
doc_external_url: https://www.ruralpayments.org/media/resources/FGS---Budget-Categories-Tables---August-2025.pdf

Stages in the clearing process

1. At the start of each calendar year and in advance of the first annual clearing exercise in April a threshold score will be set for each grant clearing category. The threshold scores will be published together with an indication of the available headroom. The headroom available will be communicated using a traffic light system and will be updated throughout the financial year. For woodland creation categories, a higher threshold score (i.e. a pre-approval score) will also be set that is above the minimum threshold score for cases.

2. Applicants will then be able to prepare their applications and take decisions about the applications based on budget position and the threshold score at that time.

3. When applications are submitted, conservancy staff may examine cases to establish whether or not a case is likely to meet the relevant threshold score. If an application would not meet the threshold score it will be rejected.

4. All Forestry Grant Scheme cases that meet the threshold score will go forward to the clearing process after the assessment stage has been completed, the case score has been entered into the IT system and the assessment approved by a senior manager.

5. National office staff will run a report within the IT system to produce a list of cases ready for clearing against each of the Forestry Grant Scheme budget categories.

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6. The list of cases within each category will be compared to the available funds or headroom in each budget category.

7. A clearing score will be set for each category so that cases are funded as per the clearing business rules set out in the budget categories document. The clearing score may be above the threshold score, depending upon the level of competition.

8. Where the value of cases exceeds the available budget for a category the clearing score will be set at a level where all the cases at or above the threshold score can be funded in line with the business rules in the budget categories document.

9. Cases scoring at or above the clearing score within each budget category will generally be approved. Cases scoring below the clearing score will generally be rejected.

10. Where a number of cases share the same score and the available budget isn't sufficient to fund them all, situations may arise where it is necessary for the clearing score to split a group of cases with the same score. Where this arises the budget will be allocated on a first-come first-served basis, based on the date the application was submitted. Cases will be approved in the date order they were received, until the available budget has been fully committed.

11. Alternatively, for options with an annual clearing round, we may use a judging panel format to verify scores and assist with decisions on the allocation of funding.

12. The clearing score from each clearing round will be entered into the IT system and the status of each case included in the clearing will be updated to show approved, rejected or partial approval.

13. Exceptionally, Scottish Forestry's national office may withdraw cases from the clearing round and refer it back to the conservancy where, for example, an anomaly is found with the case, such as the Sustainable Management of Forests element of a joint Sustainable Management of Forests / Woodland Improvement Grant case is rejected and the Woodland Improvement Grant element has a high enough score to be approved, but wouldn't then be eligible.

14. Scottish Forestry may from time to time review the budget allocation across clearing categories, where for example the pressure in some categories is much higher than others, or to reflect changes in policy priorities. Where this happens Forestry Commission Scotland would publicise the revised budgets and headroom.

Complex Forestry Grant Scheme cases

Applicants may submit Forestry Grant Scheme cases that include multiple grant options. Where this happens each separate option will be scored and will be considered in its own right as part of the clearing process for the relevant grant category. Where some options are approved and others rejected, the case will be given a partial approval, covering the options that met or exceeded the threshold score in their budget category.

In the case of woodland creation, projects will often include two or more woodland creation options, used together to create a more robust and diverse woodland. In such cases, where the different options are all part of a single woodland creation project/block that couldn't reasonably be divided up, we would adopt the following approach to treat them as a single project for clearing:

- each option will be scored separately and must meet the threshold score
- the woodland officer will then review the scores for the different options and calculate a single score by deriving the median area score using the Forestry Grant Scheme score sheet
- the options will then be considered as one project through the clearing process

Generally applicants are advised against submitting cases that include multiple options with a mix of monthly and national clearing rounds. Where such cases are submitted they will either need to wait until both clearing processes are taking place together or one of the options would need to be rejected.

Variation to FGS Contracts

We would request that applicants give careful consideration to the timing of work, and complete projects and submit claims in the allocated claim year in their contract. Where it is not possible to complete work as planned, applicants may apply to vary work, value or claim year.

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We will seek to accommodate reasonable requests for variation to contracts within the annual grants budget.

However, we expect the strong demand for forestry grants to continue and that the position on grant commitments to be tight in any one year.

This means that it may be difficult to accommodate high volumes of requests to vary contract claim years. Where a request into the preferred claim year is not possible we will seek to offer another future year, as long as there is sufficient budget headroom.

We therefore encourage FGS contract holders to make their best efforts to complete projects in the year designated in their contract.

Should projects not be completed due to adverse winter weather we would treat this as an exceptional circumstance and seek to accommodate the variation request.

Where changes (variations) to contracts are requested then these will be processed as follows:

Clearing Rounds

- variations that increase expenditure or a change to a new financial year will need to come to a clearing round, as such changes impact the budget headroom
- variations that decrease the contract value that affects the original score on which the approval was given will need to come to a clearing round
- variations that decrease the contract value but do not affect the original score on which the approval was given do not need to come to a clearing round and will be considered locally by the Conservancy
- variations need to meet the threshold scores that apply at the clearing, which may be higher than when the application was originally approved

Timing

- variations will normally be considered on a monthly or quarterly basis, depending upon the time of year and budget pressures
- other than in exceptional circumstances, during individual clearing rounds, requests for variations will generally be processed after new applications have been considered

Funding and Budget Limits

- where funding is limited in any one year or in a specific budget category, we will prioritise requests for variations from projects which have been started and delayed due to operational reasons
- where funding is limited in any one year or a grant category is under budget pressure we may introduce a financial limit and consider variations which exceed the limit on a quarterly basis

Recent changes

Section	Change
Clearing process and budget management	We've updated the budget categories and threshold document

Previous versions

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