

DARTMOOR COMMONERS' COUNCIL

Minutes of the Meeting of the Dartmoor Commoners' Council held at Two Bridges Hotel, Princetown on Wednesday 21 March 2018.

Present:

Mr J Waldon - Chairman	Mr A Coaker	Mr M Mudge
Mrs M Alford – Vice Chairman	Mr P French	Mr R Steemson
Mr R Ashford	Mr G Hill	Mr T Stratton
Mr J Aylett	Mr J Jordan	Mr D Webber
Mr P Cleave	Mrs K Little	

In attendance:

Mrs S Sloman	Mrs K McKechnie (DLPO)	Mr E Humber (NFU)
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1. Chairman's Introduction

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting & reported on the following:

- Following requests from several Council Members, in future, the March meetings will be held earlier in the month (before lambing gets underway).
- The MOD Commoners' Briefing/Lunch will be held this year on Thursday 29 November 2018.

2. Apologies for Absence

These were received from Mr C Alford, Mr L Branfield, Mr J Cooper, Mr P Cottington (Mr Ed Humber from NFU attended instead), Mr S Lake, Mr B Lavis, Mr G Mortimore, Mr M Reddaway, Mr M Retallick & Mrs A Willcocks.

3. Confirmation of Minutes

The minutes of the Meeting held on 24 January 2018 were confirmed & signed.

4. Matters Arising

4.1 Basic Payment Scheme Payments for 2017

The Chairman reported that a letter had been sent to the RPA setting out the concerns that Council Members had discussed at our last meeting. No reply has been received, despite a chaser letter being sent, requesting a response in advance of tonight's meeting. Mary Alford represented Council at the recent RPA Commons Stakeholder Group (CSG) meeting. A note of the meeting was provided to all Council Members, which she felt was 'disappointingly scant' as it did not include the discussion held regarding the 'Minchinhampton' retrospective payments. Mary Alford advised Council that they were informed at the CSG meeting that the adjustment payments for 2015, 2016 & 2017 will be paid in 3 separate payments, one for each year & commoners should start to receive payments this March. She has written to request that the meeting note be redrafted to reflect this. Although nothing has been received to date, the RPA have arranged an interim meeting for early April & a further meeting in May.

The Chairman took this opportunity to inform Council Members that some Local Commoners' Associations & farmers have yet to receive any payment for their 2017 agri-environment agreements with Natural England. Having contacted Natural England, the Chairman was advised that 55% of the agreement holders in England had not received any payment for 2017, on Dartmoor, 93 agreement holders had yet to receive their 2017 payment for their home farms & it is hoped that all payments will be received

by June 2018. The Chairman reported that Mel Stride MP for Central Devon has taken an interest in this matter on behalf of one of his constituents, who is also a member of Council & the Chairman offered Council's support to any Council Member who wishes to raise this issue with their local MP. The Chairman reported that he had written to Natural England's Chairman, Andrew Sells, to express concern over the late payments but has yet to receive a reply. In the meantime, Natural England is encouraging all agreement holders who have not received any money for their agreements to complete their customer complaint form – <https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/4LIRL/>

4.2 Dartmoor Commoners' Council's Standing Orders Update

Kate Little reported that she is in the process of drafting a letter to the County Solicitor at Devon County Council to ask if they will review the Standing Orders & advise Council if the Election Protocol should be incorporated into the Standing orders or linked to them. The Chairman thanked Kate Little & the other working group members being Mary Alford, Jonathan Aylett, John Cooper, Paul Cottingham, Philip French & Ann Willcocks for the work they had done in bringing the Standing Orders up to date.

5. Matters brought forward

Anton Coaker gave a report on the Mires Restoration Project. A copy is attached (Appendix A).

The co-ordinators for the 'Our Common Cause' project have been appointed: - Joy Howells as the national co-ordinator & Tracy May as the local co-ordinator for Dartmoor. The development phase of the project aims to compile information on the cultural & ecological heritage of Upland Commons & provide the public with the opportunity to learn about, appreciate & support the continuation of pastoral commoning.

Council is in discussions with the Two Bridges Hotel regarding the use of The Fountain Room for Council meetings. The hotel has generously provided the room, without charge, since Council was formed. However, following a review of their costs, the hotel want to charge a room hire fee (at a reduced rate). A number of options are currently being considered.

The Government's '25 year' plans for agriculture & for the environment have been published. The Chairman felt that the environment plan was particularly disappointing in that, although there were references to farming, it didn't refer to commoning & only briefly referred to the uplands & the importance of the public benefits that they provide. The agriculture plan clearly sets out the Government's strategy for the arrangements that will succeed the Common Agricultural Policy. It is accompanied by a ten week consultation, Health & Harmony: the future for food, farming & the environment in a Green Brexit, which ends on 8 May 2018. It was agreed that Council should respond to the consultation, although from a farming community's point of view the timing is not good. The Chairman offered to draft an initial response for circulation & comments & then meet with several Council Members at the end of April to finalise the response.

Council's current firm of Accountants, Condy Mathias, have significantly increased their fees for the preparation of our annual accounts & completion of an independent audit. Efforts on our part to negotiate the increased fee quoted have been unsuccessful. We are therefore in the process of obtaining quotations from other firms.

The Chairman advised Council Members that our Office Administrator, Sara, is looking into the new UK data protection rules that come into effect on 25 May 2018, to ensure that Council complies with the new law.

Anton Coaker raised concerns over issues commoners are experiencing with the TB Regulations over the '10 mile rule'. The Chairman & Mr Coaker agreed to write a letter to APHA.

6. Impact of Recreation on Farming

Mary Alford advised that the draft policy statement, that will address some of the recreation issues, has not been finalized in time for tonight's meeting. It is hoped that the meeting with event organisers, to discuss the policy & its' key messages, will be arranged for June (a time that will attract event organisers).

7. Dartmoor Commoners' Council Elections 2018 - Venues

In order to keep costs to a minimum, it was suggested that the following venues be booked, if available:-

- North Quarter – Belstone Village Hall
- South Quarter – South Brent Village Hall
- East Quarter – The Globe Inn, Chagford (private room)
- West Quarter – Dartmoor Commoners' Council Offices, Tavistock

8. Update from Dartmoor National Park Authority

Rob Steemson reported on the following:-

DNPA have submitted a proposal to Defra, based on the work of the Future of Farming Task & Finish Group, to extend Farming Futures as part of the Government's thinking on the new environmental land management scheme. Philip French could not recall Council Members having received an update from the last Task & Finish Group meeting held in November. The Chairman apologised for this oversight & agreed to circulate the meeting note.

Love Moor Life, the campaign around visitor management, which has been undertaken in partnership with Dartmoor Commoners' Council & Commons landowners, is being rolled out. Revised lambing & bird nesting posters are currently being erected around the moor by Rangers & Voluntary Wardens. DNPA has drawn up a Ranger Code (based on key points from the Countryside Code) & these are also being distributed including this year's 'Enjoy Dartmoor' magazine.

DNPA played a major role, from 26 February, warning about adverse weather & also worked in partnership with Devon County Council Highways & the Police to keep up a consistent message as conditions changed. TV & radio interviews were undertaken, along with regular information put out on social media (Facebook & Twitter), with one Ranger page message, about staying off Dartmoor, reaching an audience of 300,000 plus people.

9. Insurance Cover for Swaling on Commons

Council is unable to have a generic policy that covers the local associations when swaling, as Council does not have a direct responsibility or a direct input in this activity. Therefore, Local Commoners' Associations should have their own insurance to ensure that they are covered for all the activities on their common that they are legally liable for. Council has offered to find an insurance company or broker that can provide the Local Associations with the policy & is currently in discussions with a number of firms.

10. Update from Dartmoor Livestock Protection Officer

Karla McKechnie read out her report & a copy is attached (Appendix B).

Russell Ashford asked that Council write a letter to the police in support of their request for greater powers over dog attacks on livestock. Council agreed.

Mary Alford asked if any reports of missing livestock had been received since Council had agreed to monitor the situation following concerns raised last year. Nothing has been reported to Council as yet. Local Commoners' Association Secretaries were asked, at the beginning of the year, to start to collate any information & for it to be passed on to Council, when requested to do so, after a 6 month period. Sara agreed to liaise with the Special Rural Engagement Team on this issue.

The Chairman mentioned that Defra has finally agreed to hold a meeting, between the relevant organisations, to discuss road traffic accidents involving livestock. The New Forest will host the meeting & Karla has agreed to attend & represent Council. A date has yet to be set.

11. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Council will be held on Wednesday 30 May 2018 at 7:30pm at Two Bridges Hotel, Princetown.

Signed:.....

Date:.....

Mires Restoration Report

Provided by Anton Coaker – 21 March 2018

A group currently labelled '**The Dartmoor Peatland Partnership**', primarily organised by DNP, are in the process of applying for/obtaining funding, as part of a wider South West Water led bid, for work on Bodmin, Exmoor, and Dartmoor, to restore/improve upland mires with perceived damage.

Dartmoor Commoner representatives on the Dartmoor group are Colin Abel (Forest of Dartmoor Commoners Association), Mary Alford and Anton Coaker (Dartmoor Commoners Council). The Duchy of Cornwall are also represented as landowners.

Work proposed under current plan takes in several potential sites, measured in the tens of hectares, totalling in the hundreds, on the Forest CL164.

Should (DEFRA?) funding be confirmed, it will not include any specific payments for the commoners. That said, it is indicated that further environmental schemes are, post Brexit, likely to hinge upon, or be greatly bolstered by such matters and that the carbon 'capture and retention' potential of the mires, as well as their further perceived 'public goods', is going to come under increasing scrutiny, rather than less.

The nature of the works (blocking erosion gullies/ditches etc.) will leave small pools of water, wetting adjacent ground. The issues immediately arising are hazards to livestock, loss of grazing and inconvenience when shepherding/gathering stock. The longer term impact is a growing area of rewetted ground, which will take decades to solidify.

Commoners immediately affected are being contacted, and their co-operation, in conjunction within the wider HLS, is being sought. There is also obviously a long term interest for anyone with Forest rights to consider.

Colin and Anton are both of the opinion that we, the commoners, should try and accommodate the works as a gesture of good faith, until adequate reward can be worked into future agreements. Mary is less inclined to help until actual reward is being offered.

Discussions are ongoing.

Dartmoor Livestock Protection Officer's Report - March 2018

At last, rural police, including Devon & Cornwall, are calling for new powers to crack down on dog attacks on livestock. In Devon & Cornwall, 305 head of livestock were killed over a 3 year period with a further 229 injured. These numbers include my statistics, so it is vital that you all phone me with them so I can report incidences to the police.

A number of changes in the law are being called for. These include making dog attacks a recordable crime & triable in court (by the police, not a civil action), giving police powers to seize dogs, the creation of a DNA database of offending dogs & harsher sentences for owners. You may remember, 3 years ago, DLPS launched a campaign for the DNA testing of all dogs, the data to be held on a database together with microchip numbers. The idea was shot down & poo poed by some. It's ironic that the police are now calling for this.

There has been a spate of dog attack incidences on Ugborough & Wrangaton commons & also Roborough Down & Whitchurch. Following an incident near Belstone, I managed to obtain substantial compensation payment for the farmer. After a separate incident on Roborough Down, I again got compensation paid to the farmer.

The snow has brought trouble for farmers as you will all know, including sheep trapped in drifts & frozen water. One farmer in Ivybridge called me in dire straits having had no water for his 300 head of cattle for 48 hours. I managed to get the fire brigade there within a couple of hours. I have pulled sheep out of leats over the last few weeks, having either been chased by dogs or walked in over the snow.

A couple of strange incidents recently; the butchered remains of, what I think was, a calf, wrapped in a hessian sack on Plaster Down & a dead new-born foal wrapped in a plastic sheet tied, with a rope handle attached left near Long Ash, Roborough. The police were informed over both incidences.

I have dealt with 14 RTAs since the beginning of the year which is slightly fewer than this time last year. Again, please let me know if you have had an animal killed on the road.

I have put up quite a few dog attack signs, so please let me know if you would like any. When I was doing this on Roborough Down, I had an opportunity to look at the stock on the common. They were all looking pretty well apart from one extremely thin mare that I have asked to be removed. I would add that I was saddened to see evidence of so much fly-tipping.

I have been approached by a police officer in the Special Rural Engagement Team regarding livestock thefts. If anyone is experiencing any problems of this type, please give me a call.

A quick thanks to Neil Cole for sorting out a trapped pony at Princetown recently. Also, thanks to John Cooper for his help & Colin Abel for meeting me on his bike in the most horrendous weather to search for a pony. An interesting ride!!

Note provided by Karla McKechnie (DLPO)