

DARTMOOR COMMONERS' COUNCIL

Minutes of the Meeting of the Dartmoor Commoners' Council held on Wednesday 19 May 2021 (open-air)

Participants:

Mr P French – Chairman	Mr A Coaker	Ms T May
Mr L Branfield – Vice Chair	Mr A Cooper	Mr G Mortimore
Mr P Abel	Mr J Cooper	Mr M Radmore
Mrs M Alford	Mr K Edwards	Mr M Reddaway
Mr R Ashford	Mrs C Faulkner	Mr R Steemson
Mr P Cleave	Mr J Jordan	Mrs P Warren
	Mrs K Little	

Mrs S Sloman

Note

Under the Government's current plans regarding the easing of lockdown, gatherings of up to 30 people are permitted outside. Layland Branfield kindly offered the use of his undercover barn as a venue to hold this meeting. An appropriate level of social distancing was maintained & due to the restrictions of numbers & the venue, this meeting was not open to the public.

1. Chairman's Introduction

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting. He thanked Layland & Gill Branfield for the use of the venue & John Cooper for providing the seating.

2. Apologies for Absence

Received from Mr C Alford, Mr P Cottington, Mr G Hill, Mr S Lake, Mr R Leigh, Mrs K McKechnie (DLPO), Mr T Stratton, Mr J Waldon & Mrs A Willcocks.

3. Matters outstanding from previous meetings

None not addressed later in the agenda.

4. Matters Brought Forward at the Direction of the Chairman

None.

5. Office Administration

5.1 Workload

The Chairman thanked Council Members for their efforts over the past 12 months which have been a challenging time for everyone.

He particularly thanked those Members who have helped respond to the numerous consultations: A huge achievement which has been done 'in-house' by a handful of Council Members & not caused any additional work for Sara, Council's Office Administrator.

Due to COVID restrictions, working from the office in a multiple occupancy building has been restricted & Sara has worked mainly from home with limited resources & technology. Despite often working over her contracted hours, including evenings & weekends & not taking the time off she's owed or any of her holiday entitlement, the administrative workload is behind. The office phone is

redirected to Sara's personal mobile & she often answers calls outside of her core hours, which are normally Monday to Friday 08:30am to 1:30pm. Sara acknowledges that she has made herself easily accessible in an attempt to keep the work flowing when not working from the office & is aware of what she needs to do to address this. The Chairman asked Council Members to be mindful of her workload & core hours. Further discussions were held on the suggested measures that Council could put in place to support its Office Administrator. As no members of the public were present at this meeting, there was no requirement to propose an 'in committee' conversation. However, the outcome of this discussion is recorded in the confidential section of the meeting minutes, available to Council Members only.

5.2 Audit

Council has been advised by its accountant that the threshold for audits has increased considerably over the past few years & significantly so since the introduction of the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985 (the Act). Under new financial reporting standard regulations that have been brought in for auditing requirements, we have been advised that the amount of work now involved in an audit will result in a considerable increase in the charge for this service. The income & expenditure for Council is so simple that an audit (in today's terms) is extremely excessive. Our accountants have asked if an Independent Examination (introduced in 1993) of the accounts (by accountants) could be carried out in future instead of an audit. However, the Act does state that the accounts for each financial year be audited by an auditor.

It was agreed that this matter be further investigated & the outcome reported back to Council. The Office Administrator will lead the investigation with the help of the Chairman's wife, Charlotte (who teaches accounting qualifications & is involved with Independent Examinations) & Kate Little.

5.3 Backing Up Paper Records

The majority of Council's records, including Minutes, generated since 2012 are held in an electronic format which is backed up daily. However, all records prior to this date, including Minutes, are held in paper format in the office. These documents could be permanently lost if there was a fire, for example.

The Chairman put it to Members that at some point in the future, Council may wish to consider getting these documents backed up electronically & if so how to go about doing this. Ann Willcocks is making similar enquiries on behalf of another organisation & has offered to share her findings with Council Members in due course.

6. Shaugh Prior Commons (CL190) Issues – update

The Chairman reported that the Working Group has spent a lot of time looking into the issues. The Group has encountered increasing complexities with some of these & letters have been received from a number of Solicitors acting on behalf of the different bodies involved in the matters being addressed. In light of this, a resolution to obtain professional advice was proposed by the Chairman in an email sent to all Council Members earlier this year. It was approved by 20 votes to none (no abstentions). Matters are progressing. Kate Little is helping with the paperwork & also helping to ensure that all the appropriate procedures have been followed, the correct issues have been identified & are being investigated & helping to prepare instructions for further legal advice, if that proves necessary. Council Members will be kept updated.

7. Mires Restoration Project/Rewetting

In an email sent to all Council Members last week, Anton Coaker made an en bloc proposal that Council requests no new rewetting is agreed on Dartmoor commons until there is a better understanding about the implications & that Council establishes a working group to explore aspects of the rewetting. His proposal was seconded by Mary Alford. Although Council Members rejected the proposal with 11 votes against, 9 votes in favour & 1 abstention, there was an overriding request that a Working Group is set up to review the effect on commoners of the existing peatland work, gather facts & advise Council regarding future support for peatland rewetting work. Anton Coaker proposed that the Group be formed with members being Philip French (Chairman), Layland Branfield (Vice-Chairman), Mary Alford & Anton Coaker (Council's Representatives on Mires Restoration Project), Tracy May & Colin Abel (Forest of Dartmoor Commoners Association). Penny Warren seconded the proposal, which was passed unanimously by those Council Members present. Furthermore, the Chairman agreed that he would liaise with the Peatland Partnership & request that a site visit be arranged for Council Members as soon as possible.

8. Council's Pony Consultation

At Council's virtual discussion meeting held in February, the Chairman reported that his proposal to consult with Council Members & other interested parties with the aim of creating a list of concerns & issues relating to ponies, including the derogation, for consideration by Council's Pony Working Group & ultimately Council, was passed by 20 votes to 1 & no abstentions. He advised Council Members that he hopes to start collating this information, with the help of Ann, shortly. Both Mary Alford & Charlotte Faulkner questioned why this piece of work was being conducted & why it is not being led by Council's Pony Working Group. Following a discussion, the Chairman advised Council Members that the resolution had already been passed by Council & he was not prepared to renege on this.

The Chairman reported that Defra are also undertaking a series of meetings with derogated semi-wild pony interests to discuss strengths/weaknesses/future of its equine ID system & derogation. They are currently classing this as an internal policy review & aim to launch a public consultation later in the year. The Chairman will expect Council's Pony Working Group to lead Council's response.

It was agreed that Council's Pony Working Group would meet as soon as possible with a provisional date set for Monday 24 May 2021.

Karla McKechnie (DLPO) asked that Charlotte Faulkner be formally thanked for helping to deal with the ponies that had gotten into Emsworthy Mire, owned by Devon Wildlife Trust, from Haytor common & for collecting an unmarked stallion that was hanging by the roadside in the Haytor area.

9. Dartmoor Visitor Management

9.1 Press Release

Following on from the discussions held virtually in March on visitor management, Members were disappointed that Council's suggestions hadn't been included in the DNPA press release. A proposal, made by Mary Alford & seconded by Charlotte Faulkner, that Council issues its own press release, was circulated to Council Members accompanied by a suggested statement inviting comments. The resolution was not passed (7 votes in favour, 10 votes against & 2 abstentions). However, due to the number of comments received,

the Chairman felt that Council may wish to review its position on engaging with the media & come up with a more detailed strategy. After further discussions, Anton Coaker offered to tidy up the draft press/social media release prior to it being recirculated to Council Members for approval.

9.2 Commercial Dog Walking

John Cooper expressed his disappointed that he had not received any response from the DNPA on an issue he had reported regarding a commercial dog walking business. Following a discussion on the matter, the Chairman agreed to pursue the matter with DNPA.

10. The Heather & Grass etc. Burning (England) Regulations 2021

These Regulations were laid before Parliament in February. Defra launched a consultation seeking views on the Guidance that will accompany the new Regulations. This Guidance has now been published & is available at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/heather-and-grass-burning-apply-for-a-licence>

11. Members representing Council at Meetings:

- **Dartmoor Visitor Management:** 8 Apr 2021 – Layland Branfield
- **Our Common Cause: Our Upland Commons Partnership:** 20 Apr 2021 – Philip French
- **Defra Semi-Wild Equine Derogation Policy Discussion*:** 22 Apr 2021 - Philip French, Mary Alford, Charlotte Faulkner & Sara Sloman
- **Defra Commons Options Workshop:** 17 May 2021 – Layland Branfield & Tracy May

*Notes available. If any Council Member wishes to receive copies, please email office@dartmoorcommoners.org.uk

10. Date of Next Meeting

The Chairman thanked everyone for their attendance & advised Council is hoping to hold its next meeting at the Two Bridges Hotel, Princetown on 30 June 2021. Further details will follow.

Signed: *Philip French*

Date: 30 June 2021