

DARTMOOR COMMONERS' COUNCIL

Minutes of the Meeting of the Dartmoor Commoners' Council held at Two Bridges Hotel, Princetown on Wednesday 1 March 2023.

Participants:

Mr P French – Chairman	Mr W Dracup	Ms T May
Mr L Branfield – Vice-Chairman	Mr K Edwards	Mr M Radmore
Mr P Abel	Mrs C Faulkner	Mr J Reddaway
Mrs M Alford	Mr G Hill	Mr J Shears
Mr R Ashford	Mr E Humber (NFU)	Mr R Steemson
Mr P Cleave	Mr J Jordan	Mr T Stratton
Mr A Coaker	Mr R Leigh	Mrs P Warren
Mr J Cooper	Mrs K Little	Mrs A Webber
Mr P Cottington		Mrs A Willcocks
Mrs S Sloman	Mrs K McKechnie (DLPO)	Miss L Talbot

1. Chairman's Introduction

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

He reported that the **Dartmoor Test & Trial** has begun with the work addressing two strands: Developing a Payment by Results approach & the governance required for this approach to be successful on common land. The Test & Trial will be overseen by a partnership: Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA) will provide the administrative structure & secretariat & work will be undertaken by the Countryside & Community Research Institute (CCRI), University of Gloucestershire & led by Prof. Janet Dwyer.

An open meeting will be held at Two Bridges Hotel, Princetown on Tuesday 14 March 2023 starting at 7.30pm. This is an opportunity for anyone from the farming & landowning community to meet some of the team, to learn about the Project & to clarify how they might contribute.

2. Apologies for Absence

Received from Mr P Heard.

3. Confirmation of Minutes

The minutes of the last Council Meeting had been circulated to all Council Members requesting that any comments be made in advance of tonight's meeting. No comments were received. Members were advised of two updates to the minutes: the DNPA Byelaw review has been paused & the Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 document has been published, following the Environment Act 2021: Environmental Targets consultation, & is available on the Gov.UK website. The minutes of the Meeting held 25 January 2023 were then confirmed & signed.

4. Matters outstanding from previous meetings:

4.1 Pigs on Brent Moor

The Chairman declared his conflict of interest & the Vice-Chairman reported that the pigs have not been seen on the common since the last Council meeting. However, Council has received a reply letter from the owner of the pigs, who also owns part of the common, advising that they may turn pigs out again this summer. It was agreed that Council must make its position clear & set out the requirements, under the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985, that must be adhered to. A further letter will be sent inviting the owner to meet with a small group of Council Members ahead of any pigs being returned to the common.

The Chairman returned to the Chair.

5. Correspondence Received

A list of correspondence received had been circulated to all Council Members who may request copies if required.

6. Matters brought forward at the discretion of the chair:

6.1 Natural England

The Chairman advised that Council had been made aware of a letter sent from Natural England (NE) to those Local Commoners' Associations seeking an extension to their agri-environment agreement. The letter outlines the principles which will underpin NE's approach to supporting an agreement extension & includes a focus on summer mixed grazing with a presumption that at least 50% of agreed livestock units comprise of cattle &/or ponies over this period. The Chairman informed Council Members that he had already written to NE expressing a number of concerns over the implications of the letter content & requesting some clarification ahead of tonight's meeting. He reported that NE will provide each common with individual stocking rates informed by current habitat & site condition, alongside a target stocking calendar to be reached by year 5 of any extension that is offered by the RPA. The emphasis will be on grazing for cattle & sheep but with recognition that some low level winter grazing with ponies could be accommodated within the stocking calendars that are developed. Any pony grazing would need to come into the overall recommended rates & would not be exempt from the calculation. NE considers the winter grazing season to be 1 November to 30 April.

South Dartmoor SSSI

The Chairman reported that the public inquiry appeal against the Refusal of Consent Notice has been withdrawn by the appellant & NE has requested that all stock be removed from the site by 3 March 2023 or enforcement options will be considered.

The Chairman advised that letters had already been sent to NE (David Slater, Regional Director, South West) & all Dartmoor MPs drawing their attention to what Council considers to be totally unreasonable actions by NE. The letters set out the serious potential damage such actions could have to Dartmoor & requested help to facilitate engagement with relevant parties to find a workable solution.

Following a discussion, it was acknowledged that commoners know the land & should be permitted to experiment with grazing levels. The increase in 'wild' land i.e. that untamed by livestock is a fire risk. The actions of NE have serious implications & all Council Members & Local Commoners Associations are encouraged to write to their MPs.

6.2 Recreational Night Time Events

Concerns were raised regarding the number of night time events being held on Dartmoor. It is understood that the Recreation Events Policy does not support night events yet numbers seem to be increasing. Council Members were reminded of the importance of responding to planned recreational event consultations with any concerns. DNPA representatives agreed to feedback concerns to their Recreation Strategy Development Office & Council will follow this up with a letter.

7. Financial Estimates 2023/2024

At the last Council Meeting, a shortfall was reported for the estimated budget. Members agreed to the principle of raising dues payable by those registered on Council's Register subject to further discussions regarding the amount, once some facts & figures had been considered:

- The Chairman advised that the dues were last increased in 2010, 13 years ago. Prior to that, increases were every 5 years at a ratio of 1:6; a 1p per livestock unit increase in the non-grazier rate results in a 6p per livestock unit increase in the grazier rate, generating approximately an extra £4k. If dues had continued to rise in line with previous years (i.e. every 5 years) they would have risen twice by 1p/6p each time & the minimum spend would have risen from £5.00 to £6.50. This would have generated approximately an additional £10k since 2010.
- In response to a question raised, the Chairman confirmed that the budget shortfall is due mainly to legal costs being incurred by Council on two main issues; one regarding the validity of grazing rights being exercised by virtue of a farm business tenancy agreement & the other being an internal grievance. The Chairman recognised the difficulty faced by Members in having to explain to commoners the reasons behind any increase in dues. He explained that due to the nature of the solicitor's letters Council has received regarding these issues, the services of legal professionals were necessary. The questioner acknowledged this but highlighted that the money could be better spent e.g. paying for ecologists to help Council address the more serious matters that are affecting all commoners on Dartmoor.
- It was mentioned that Council could potentially face further legal challenges as it continues the exercise to check the entries on its 'live' Register & verify a commoner's right to claim common rights by virtue of ownership or tenancy. The Chairman reminded Council that Members had previously unanimously agreed that anomalies on Council's Register must be addressed. He advised that Council has made endless efforts in all cases where anomalies have been identified to sort matters without legal intervention.
- A question was raised over the level of dues paid by those with agisted rights & owner's rights. The Chairman reported that these types of right to graze are complex but he gave an undertaking that the contributions requested will be reviewed & recommendations brought to Council for ratification in time for any amendment to take effect at the same time as any increase in dues from registered commoners.
- In line with the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985, any increase in dues for registered commoners has to be agreed by 1 March in the financial year preceding the increase.

- To get back in line with previous rises then fees would need to rise again with effect from 1 July 2025.

A proposal was made by Ann Willcocks & seconded by Anton Coaker to raise dues payable to 14p per livestock unit for non-graziers, 84p per livestock unit for graziers & raise the minimum spend to £6.50

The motion was carried to raise the dues with effect from 1 July 2023 with 20 Members voting in favour, 4 against & 2 abstentions.

In line with the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985, copies of this resolution & of the financial estimates agreed by Council will be sent to each commoner whose name is recorded in Council's Register with invoices for the financial year ending 30 June 2024.

8. News Article: Spring 2023

Anton Coaker has offered to put a piece together on the situation with Natural England & forward to the group assigned to drafting the news articles. Other suggested topics include lambing & the impact of night-time events on Dartmoor.

9. Reports from Members representing Council at meetings:

- **Dartmoor Commons Owners Association:** 18 Jan – Philip French

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

10. Update from Dartmoor National Park Authority

Rob Steemson reported that:

- 56 people had completed the **commoner's fire training**. Anyone else is welcome to do so & Tracy May will send further details to the office for circulation. A discussion was had about the value of the training & whether it could be valid for a longer term.

Several Council Members requested replacement signs e.g., no cycling as many have been damaged &/or removed.

A point was made that, according to the wild camping map on DNPA website, camping on areas of common land owned by DNPA are not permitted. DNPA representatives advised that this is currently being considered.

11. TB Control Plans for 2023

It was reported that the Cattle Graziers' Packs for 2023 have been circulated to all Local Commoners' Association secretaries to apply for a licence, as part of the Dartmoor TB Control Plan that reduces the number of TB movement tests required by TB Regulations.

3. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Council will be held on Wednesday 19 April 2023 at 7:30pm at Two Bridges Hotel, Princetown.

The Chairman thanked those in the public gallery for attending & declared the meeting closed.

A motion to go into a closed session was then proposed by the Chairman. The outcome of these discussions is recorded in the confidential section of the meeting minutes, available to Council Members only.

Signed: *Philip French*

Date: *19 April 2023*