

DARTMOOR COMMONERS' COUNCIL

Minutes of the Meeting of the Dartmoor Commoners' Council held at Two Bridges Hotel, Princetown on Wednesday 19 April 2023.

Participants:

Mr P French – Chairman	Mr J Cooper	Mrs K Little
Mr L Branfield – Vice-Chairman	Mr K Edwards	Mr M Radmore
Mr P Abel	Mrs C Faulkner	Mr J Reddaway
Mrs M Alford	Mr P Heard	Mr R Steemson
Mr R Ashford	Mr G Hill	Mrs P Warren
Mr P Cleave	Mr J Jordan	Mrs A Webber
Mr A Coaker	Mr R Leigh	Mrs A Willcocks
Mrs S Sloman	Miss L Talbot	

1. Chairman's Introduction

The Chairman opened the meeting by giving thanks to Rob Steemson for all he has done while a member of Council. Rob's role at Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA) is changing & he will no longer be their officer representative on Council once his term ends on 30 June 2023. Rob's replacement will be formally appointed at Council's AGM.

The Chairman advised that the Regional Director of Natural England (NE), David Slater, was invited to join the meeting but was unable to attend.

2. Apologies for Absence

Received from Mr P Cottington, Mr W Dracup, Mr E Humber (NFU), Ms T May, Mr T Stratton & Mrs K McKechnie (DLPO).

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. Mary Alford had raised concerns about, what she felt was, the 'shoddy' nature of recent minutes & asked who was writing them. She felt that the coverage of a question she had raised at the last meeting on wild camping & the response given by Rob Steemson was not accurately recounted. She also questioned why names were not attributed to comments. The Chairman reported that he has full confidence in the administrative staff & how the minutes are written. He advised that minutes are viewed & checked by Council's Officers before circulation. He suggested that if any Council Member wanted further clarity on the DNPA's position re wild camping, they contact the Authority direct. In light of the fact no other issues were raised, the Chairman proposed the minutes be duly agreed & signed. This was seconded by Anton Coaker.

The motion was carried with 17 Members voting in favour, 2 against with 2 abstentions.

4. Matters outstanding from previous meetings:

4.1 Recreational Night Events

Following its last meeting, Council had written to James Wright (DNPA Recreation Strategy Development Officer) querying the number of night time events held when the Recreation Events Policy states there is a presumption against them. In his response, James Wright said that there has only been one objection to a night time event during a consultation & that any concerns should be lodged as part of the consultation process. Council Members strongly disagreed. They felt that it was an incorrect interpretation of the Events Policy & the onus should not be on commoners to raise objections when these types of events should not be routinely happening. It was agreed that Council send a letter of response, pointing out that night time events should only be approved under special circumstances.

When questioned on a recent 'See the Stars' event promoted by DNPA, Rob Steemson confirmed this was a private junior ranger event held on private land.

4.2 Financial Estimates 2023/2024

In a return to the previous minutes, it was suggested that commoners are getting annoyed at having to pay full grazing fees even on units they cannot/do not graze. They feel they should be able to pay the lower, non-grazing rate on units not used. It is to be noted that for the purpose of meeting the Commoners' Council's net revenue requirement, Council is bound by the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985. This states that the contributions a commoner, registered on Council's Register, is liable to pay is calculated on the total number of livestock units they are *entitled* to turn onto the common, even if they turn out a smaller number, which many commoners do. The Chairman did not wish to discuss the matter of the fees charged further as it had already been debated & decided upon by Council at the previous meeting.

5. Correspondence Received

A list of correspondence received had been circulated to all Council Members who may request copies if required. Several requests had been made & copies sent.

Mary Alford suggested that actual copies of correspondence should be circulated, not just a list, to ensure that all Members are aware of any issues. The Chairman felt that the current arrangement is adequate with the onus on Members to request copies of any correspondence if they wish.

Mary Alford expressed her concern over some of the matters that Council is dealing with & the large costs that Council could potentially incur. She questioned what would happen if Council was faced with legal challenges, wiping out Council's funds & whether there was suitable insurance cover in place. She requested sight of Council's insurance policy. The secretary agreed to circulate a copy to Council Members.

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

6.1 Wild Camping

Rob Steemson explained that 3 areas of common land on Holne Moor, Haytor Down & Plasterdown, had been gifted to DNPA many years ago with byelaws in place that did not allow wild camping. However, on parts of the land at Holne Moor & Haytor Down, DNPA have now permitted wild camping & these areas will be added to the interactive camping map on DNPA's website.

6.2 Natural England (NE)

The Chairman provided an update on this fast moving situation. Since the last Council meeting, a list of questions had been sent to NE in advance of a meeting held with various stakeholders to discuss agri-environment agreements rollovers on Dartmoor. These questions were by no means an exhaustive list but covered main points & concerns collated from Council Members. The questions & responses given by NE were circulated, along with a note of the meeting, to Council Members & Local Commoners Associations (LCAs).

A parliamentary debate (Debate) was held on 18 April with local MPs Sir Geoffrey Cox KC, Gary Streeter & Anthony Mangnall in attendance. The Chairman expressed thanks on behalf of Council for their efforts in getting this debate off the ground & raising the issues farmers & landowners are facing in light of the proposed changes by NE. Council members were also praised for the actions in getting the issues highlighted & many had conversed with MPs. The Minister is now considering next steps but it is hoped that a 1 year + 4-year approach to existing agri-environment agreement rollovers will be granted to allow for an independent review of the current impact of stock management in year 1 & an adaptive management approach for years 2 to 5 that would aim to deliver favourable condition. This will give LCAs & Commoners time to fully understand what is being proposed as currently some could be forced to make very quick & potentially damaging decisions.

It was noted by one member that while others should be praised, Mel Stride MP failed to act, possibly due to a conflict of interest.

A Council Member questioned that during the Debate it was mentioned that Dartmoor Commoners' Council had agreed to fund an inquiry. The Chairman confirmed that at Council's meeting in December, it was agreed that Council would help fund a facilitator to undertake an independent review with caveats on spending & involvement. It is not yet clear from the Debate if there would be a facilitator, an inquiry or a combination of both, this would need to be clarified.

8. Reports from Members representing Council at meetings:

- **Our Common Cause***: 21 March – Mary Alford.

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

9. Update from Dartmoor Livestock Protection Officer

In Karla's absence, the Secretary read out her latest report – see Appendix A.

Council thanked Karla for all the hard work & effort she puts in, while sometimes facing abuse from members of the public.

A request was made for more of the signs from the Police about dogs.

10. Magistrate Court Appeal: Mary Alford v Dartmoor Commoners' Council

A case management hearing via CVP (cloud video platform) will be held on 24 May 2023 at Plymouth District Magistrates' Court.

11. Cattle & Public Access

Following a report to the Health & Safety Executive (HSE), from a member of the public who was attacked by cattle while walking on open access land, Council circulated a letter, from the HSE to all Members & LCAs reminding cattle graziers of the duties & control measures required when grazing cattle on the commons. The letter advised that any future incidents reported to HSE will be investigated & enforcement action taken where contraventions of health & safety law are identified.

In response to concerns raised by LCAs, Anton Coaker has produced a draft risk assessment template which could be used by cattle graziers to show due process to mitigate risks to the public from cattle. The idea being, if there was an attack, owners could show what they have done to try & reduce the likelihood of it happening

A group of Council Members (Layland Branfield, Anton Coaker, John Cooper & James Reddaway) will meet to progress this initiative & report back to Council.

12. Pony Management

As previously reported, Council is undertaking a review of its existing procedures & regulations on pony management with an aim to reduce the number of unmarked/illegal ponies on the commons & to strengthen the pony derogation it maintains. The secretary reported that **only ponies listed on Council's derogation are exempt from having to be microchipped & passported** & in order to create a baseline to work from, all LCAs were asked for details of known pony keepers who were then sent a form to complete & return providing further details. The majority of LCAs did respond but some did not. Out of the 103 forms subsequently sent to pony keepers, only 20 were returned.

Two Council Members reported that pony keepers felt victimised as this type of information was not required for cattle or sheep. However, it was pointed out that Council does not hold any derogation for sheep but information is requested annually for those cattle graziers signed into the Dartmoor TB Control Plan.

The Chairman urged the quartermen to help by explaining to the pony keepers in their areas why the information is required & the importance of Council having up to date records, especially for the derogation. He explained that there was no presumption of wrong-doing but there are known cases where ponies should be added or removed from the derogation list but Council has not been informed. The derogation is very important & now under threat. Members were assured that Council wanted to protect the derogation.

The Chairman made it clear Council must decide how to move forward with pony management & advised that a number of different possibilities will be sent out to Council Members in advance of the next meeting when options will be discussed.

13. Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the Council will be held on Wednesday 31 May 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: *31 May 2023*

Karla McKechnie Livestock Protection Officer

Report to Dartmoor Commoners' Council 19th April 2023

There has been a bad start to the year with dog attacks. I have had 40 dog related incidents already. The Police have designed a new on-line form called 'Karla's Form', specifically for reporting dog incidents on Dartmoor. I got a lot of press coverage for dog attacks in the papers & on the radio.

We had two working days with the Police on Dartmoor, one on Roborough Down & one at Cadover, spending several hours speaking to members of the public, dog owners & erecting police signage to deter irresponsible dog owners.

A recent bad attack at Cadover resulted in two heavily in lamb ewes being killed. There was video footage & Police were called. The dog owner took the dog straight to the vets to be put & substantial compensation was paid to the farmer.

Please keep any dog reports coming in to me.

Road Traffic Accidents (RTAs)

I had a lot of press coverage in early March when eight ponies were involved in collisions, six of them being killed. This was all within just eight days.

There have been 17 RTAs so far this year.

The Weather

The weather in March has been exceptionally wet & has knocked condition off a lot of the stock on the moor. Seven ponies have been found dead, & several in poor condition have been removed.

Fingers crossed the weather will start to pick up.

Lambing

I have had countless & calls about lambing. Many dead ewes & dead & abandoned lambs.

My thanks to many of the farmers that help me deal with problems on the moor.

Karla