

## DARTMOOR COMMONERS' COUNCIL

### Minutes of the Meeting of the Dartmoor Commoners' Council held at Two Bridges Hotel, Princetown on Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> June 2025.

#### Participants:

Mr L Branfield - Chairman	Mr N Cole	Mrs K Little
Ms T May – Vice-Chairman	Mr J Cooper	Mr M Morris
Mr P Abel	Mr K Edwards	Mr J Reddaway
Mrs M Alford	Mr J French	Mr J Shears
Mr R Ashford	Mr P Heard	Mrs P Warren
Mr P Cleave	Mr R Jordan	Mrs A Webber
Mr A Coaker	Mr S Lee (DNPA)	Mrs A Willcocks

Mrs D Butterfield - Secretary    Mrs K McKechnie (DLPS)

#### 1. Chairman's Introduction

The Chairman opened by taking a moment to remember Mr Ivan Mortimore, who recently passed away just three weeks short of his ninety-fifth birthday.

The Chairman advised the Council that he would not be standing for another term as Chairman, citing other projects that require his attention. He noted that he would be up for re-election next June and suggested that it might be time for someone younger from the East Quarter to take on the role. He wanted the Council to be aware of his decision prior to the AGM.

#### 2. Apologies for Absence

Apologies received from Mr W Dracup, Mr R Leigh, Mr M Radmore and Mr R Williams.

#### 3. Confirmation of Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 March 2025 had been circulated in advance, with members invited to submit comments by Monday 2 June. One amendment was received from Mrs K. McKechnie and incorporated accordingly.

Mr J. Shears raised two points requiring verification: Mr A. Coaker's attendance and whether Mr P. Abel seconded a motion. As a result, approval of the minutes was deferred awaiting clarification.

#### 4. Matters Arising from Previous Meetings:

##### 4.1 Local Commoners' Association 'No Go Zone' Maps

At the Dartmoor Commoners' Council meeting on 5th March 2025, it was agreed that all Local Commoners' Associations would be invited to submit maps identifying No-Go Zones for recreational activities. The purpose of this exercise was to help prevent erosion, reduce habitat disturbance, and support informed recreational access across Dartmoor.

A formal request was issued to Associations, with a submission deadline of 15th May 2025. A total of eight submissions have been received to date. All information to date has been circulated with Council. Mrs A Willcocks confirmed some Associations are still creating maps for submission.

**Action:** Send report to Director of Conservation & Communities Dartmoor National Park Authority, additional reports can be forwarded in due course.

#### **4.2 Dartmoor Outdoor Festival – Update**

The Council noted an email from James Wright of Dartmoor National Park Authority (previously circulated to Council Members as part of the correspondence pack), apologising for previous confusion about communications with Holne and Haytor commoners regarding a guided walk event on 29 August. Hannah Durdin, Co-Director of the Dartmoor Outdoor Festival had also invited the Council to have a stand at the festival weekend, but the Council declined due to lack of resources.

#### **4.3 TB – Contact NFU TB Group to make cause for policy review**

There will be a meeting of the TB Sub Committee on the 17 June with Rebecca Gristy BVSc, MVPH (EAD), MRCVS Veterinary Head for Field Delivery – Western Region and members of the NFU TB Team, with representatives of APHA to escalate the TB issues on Dartmoor Commons regarding six-month testing, post-breakdown testing and movement restrictions

#### **4.4 Council Member Casual Vacancy: East Quarter**

Mr David Reddaway was appointed to fill the Casual Vacancy on Council and in accordance with the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985, shall hold office until the end of the term of office of the person in whose place he has been appointed, being 30 June 2028.

### **5. Correspondence received**

A list of correspondence was circulated to Council members prior to the meeting.

#### **5.1 Burrator Catchment**

Mr N Cole asked for an official response from Council due to registration changes made by the Open Spaces Society on the Burrator Catchment. Council will investigate if this issue falls under its jurisdiction, in the interim it was agreed to provide a link to the public hearing for Council members and interested parties.

**Action:** Send Council Members and interested parties a link to the public hearing outcome.

#### **5.2 National Peat Map**

Mr. J. French raised his concern that the recently released national Peat Map, which could have major implications for future agri-environmental agreements, should have been addressed to a more senior or significant member of Natural England rather than the generic contact provided on the website. The original letter had been sent to [Publications@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:Publications@naturalengland.org.uk), and Mr. French expressed doubt that this would lead to an appropriately considered response given the importance of the issue.

**Action:** The Chairman agreed to follow up by 15 June 2025 if a satisfactory response to the letter has not been received by that time.

### **6. Matters brought forward at the direction of the Chairman**

Presentation by Matthew Morris Duchy of Cornwall – Report attached (Appendix 1)

### **7. Matters dealt with by Officers since previous Meeting**

The Chairman provided a brief report on decisions taken since the last meeting in March to improve office efficiency, following agreement by Council Members at the Round Table session held on 20 February.

The Council has transitioned to South Devon Accounting and QuickBooks Online, a move that represents a cost-saving, efficient, and future-proof solution. In Year 1, the transition offers notable savings and operational improvements. From Year 2 onwards, it is expected to deliver significantly reduced ongoing costs.

This approach aligns with the Council's evolving administrative needs and provides sustained benefits, including improved financial transparency, operational continuity, and reduced administrative burden—making it a prudent and forward-looking decision. See attached report (Appendix 2).

In addition, the Chairman explained that the office's software and hardware systems will shortly be upgraded to ensure they are capable of supporting a secure and compliant network. The cost of this upgrade will be £3,792.

## **8. Secretaries Report**

### **Dues Payment and Allocation Process**

The Council was informed that the majority of dues had been paid by the 31 May 2025 deadline, and the allocation process is currently underway. To minimise administrative costs, a notice was included with the invoices advising rights holders that payments would not be actively chased and no reminders would be issued. Council was asked to consider whether Secretary time and resources should be allocated to pursuing unpaid dues, or whether those rights holders who have not paid should be removed from the Live Register at the year-end (30 June 2025).

**Action: The Chairman proposed, given the transitional nature of the current year, that a single follow-up by phone or email be undertaken for unpaid dues.**

## **9. Any Reports from Members Representing Council at Meetings**

### **9.1 Land Use Management Group**

Mrs A Willcocks provided a report. A Project Manager will be appointed within six weeks, supported by a facilitator and administrator. Ten project groups have been formed, with costed work plans underway. Groups will submit scope proposals by the end of June. The project website is now live. Total funding is £500,000 over two years, to cover staffing and delivery. Practical trials and site visits are being considered.

## **10. Receive/Consider Reports, Minutes & Recommendations from Sub-Committees**

### **10.1 Landscape & Conservation: Land Use in England and Heather & Grass Burning Consultations**

It was noted that all consultations were submitted prior to the stated deadline. No issues were reported regarding the submission process.

If any Council Member wishes to receive a copy of the consultation responses submitted, please contact the Office

### **10.2 Livestock: Cattle Incidents & HSE - Moved to confidential**

### **10.3 Policies & Procedures: Review of Insurance Policies / Conservation Policy/ Habitat Regs Policy – Report delayed**

### **10.4 Ponies:**

Mr N Cole Lead Pony Sub Committee provided a report and recommendations. These being:

- The Secretary to write to all Local Commoners' Associations prior to the annual drifts, explaining responsibilities for unmarked ponies.
- The Council to formally remind Local Associations of their responsibilities concerning unmarked ponies, referencing the relevant legal provisions.
- Approval of the draft Dartmoor Semi-Wild Equine Derogation & DCC Pony Keepers Form.
- Retain the current stallion accreditation framework.

**Mr J Shears proposed adoption of the draft Dartmoor Semi-Wild Equine Derogation & DCC Pony Keepers Form. Mrs A Willcocks seconded the proposal.**

**Mr R Ashford requested a clear period.**

**The Chairman proposed a Round Table prior to the Drifts.**

#### **Update African Horse Sickness Round Table**

The Secretary attended an African Horse Sickness Preparedness Workshop at the request of the Pony Lead Mr Neil Cole and authorized by the Chair and Vice Chair. Notes are available from the office.

#### **11. Shaugh Prior Commons (CL190)**

The Chairman provided a short update and asked Council to approve the recommendations made to date from the Round Table held on 21 May 2025.

Mrs M Alford raised an objection and explained her view that the recommendations should not be passed piece meal, but as a whole. The Chairman explained council members had discussed and dealt with designated sections and did not need to revisit them at another round table session and they were ready for approval. Mrs M Alford supported by Mr P Abel and Mrs P Warren felt they could have some relevance on forward proceedings.

Mr K Edwards proposed to pass the recommendations. The Chairman asked for a vote of hands: Mrs M Alford received 3 Votes / Mr K Edwards received 3 Votes

**The Chairman agreed to go back to a round table session to bring further recommendations to Council.**

#### **12. Update from Dartmoor National Park Authority**

Simon Lee reported on:

**Supreme Court Judgment 21 May** - The Byelaw review had been put on hold but following the supreme court judgment DNPA are seeking legal advice on the next steps of the Byelaw review. The camping right is clarified by the National Park byelaws which effectively define what is meant by open-air recreation. Their purpose is to provide a framework for safe and sustainable enjoyment of open-air recreation while respecting the rights of landowners and protecting Dartmoor for future generations. It is important to note that it is not a blanket right to camp wherever, or do whatever, you want. With the right comes a responsibility to make sure that you tread lightly and leave no trace. The Ranger team will be working with partners to reaffirm this message. To facilitate this DNPA have:

**Dartmoor Marshals** – They started last weekend of 30/31May and will be patrolling until 14 September. The Marshals work from 4:00pm until 9:30pm patrolling the moor addressing any Byelaw issues they find and have a focus on ensuring people are backpack camping and not fly camping. There is one van out patrolling Friday and Saturday nights from now until the schools finish at which point there will be two vans and four Marshals out patrolling every Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings.

**Engagement Volunteers** - DNPA have started to deploy Engagement volunteers at weekends at key Honeypot locations. The Volunteers will be engaging with people at

weekends between now and the middle of September. The key areas that they will be patrolling are Haytor, Two Bridges and Foggingtor and the Yellowmead track.

**FiPL** - The Farming in Protected Landscapes scheme has been extended for another year and is open for new applications.

**Rainbow Family** - DNPA have been made aware of a Rainbow Family encampment North East of Burrator Reservoir. The encampment is on South West Water land and it is believed the bailiffs have visited and given them 24hrs notice to vacate.

### **13. FiPL Applications:**

Tracy May provided an update on two current projects supported through the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme, Animal Marks Book and Wildfire Plan:

**13.1. Animal Marks Books** - A total of 300 copies of the Animal Marks Book have been printed. These will be distributed to all Local Commoners' Associations (LCAs), with an additional copy sent to Karla McKechnie, Dartmoor Livestock Protection Officer. The pack includes both the Marks Book and a booklet containing tag numbers. Three submissions were received after the deadline. These are being amended in-house using sticky labels and will be finalised over the next few weeks. Funding for this project was provided as follows: 80% from FiPL and 20% from the Forest of Dartmoor Commoners' Association.

**13.2 Dartmoor-Wide Fire Plan Phase 2** – This was completed at the end of March, following an eight-month project timeline. Key outcomes included:

- 29 Local Commoners' Associations (LCAs) each developed their own wildfire response plans and accompanying maps.
- All maps have been added to existing GIS mapping layers.
- 8 LCAs received training in the use of QGIS (Quantum Geographic Information System).
- Physical improvements included widening 54 km of tracks (with 2–3 passes each side), repairing 500 metres of track, and improving 25 river crossings.

This project was jointly funded by FiPL and the Dartmoor Fire Partnership.

**13.3 Dartmoor-Wide Fire Plan Phase 3** - Tracy May requested the Council's support for this phase, which aims to:

- Complete mapping in areas where LCAs are not actively participating by incorporating local knowledge.
- Implement Q Field, enabling shared access among multiple users and allowing contractors to edit, track, and upload work—creating a living document.
- Continue essential track repairs, vegetation cutting, and river crossing improvements.
- Secure match funding from members of the Dartmoor Fire Partnership.

**The Council agreed to support Phase 3 of this project.**

**13.4 Risk Assessments for Cattle Graziers** - moved to confidential

### **13.5 Local Commoners Association Secretary Support Group**

The Secretary gave a report on the Secretary Support Group meeting held on the 28 May, in partnership with Natural England, Dartmoor Hill Farm Project and supported by Council member Ann Willcocks. The purpose was to explore interest in improving support and governance across the commons, with a view to developing a Farming in Protected

Landscapes (FiPL) application. Ten Local Commoners Association Secretaries attended, with several apologies. The meeting included a presentation on SSSI assessments by Simon Lee (Natural England) and contributions from an IT specialist. A key proposal is to create a new Dartmoor Commoners' Council website with a dedicated web portal for secretaries and administrators, offering templates, guidance, and resources to support governance and aid the transition to ELM. The project will also include Project Officer time and a broader focus on improving governance across Dartmoor's commons.

The Council approved the development of a FiPL application for this project, with match funding to be sought from the Dartmoor Hill Farm Project and partnership from Natural England. Project delivery is targeted for completion by February 2026.

**14 Co-Opted Positions**

**14.1 NFU Representative**

Sophie Herd was approved by all to join Council

**14.2. Natural England**

Simon Lee Proposed by Mrs A Willcocks Seconded by Mr J Shears

**15. Date of Next Meeting: 30 July 2025.** This will be the Annual General Meeting of Dartmoor Commoners' Council

**16. Confidential Matters (to be discussed 'in committee')**

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

**Signed: Layland Branfield**

**Date: 30/07/2025**

## Report From Matthew Morris FRICS FAAV, Rural Director, Duchy of Cornwall

It's been something of a baptism of fire since February. Not having either a Land Steward or a Land Agent in the office here has been a real challenge.

We've just about managed to keep the plates spinning—though it hasn't been easy, and my own logistics haven't helped. This week alone, I've visited four of the five inhabited islands on Scilly, travelled through Cornwall and Princetown—and it's only Wednesday. I still have the small matter of a joint Royal visit to the Royal Cornwall Show to contend with.

I want to take a moment to thank all of you I've engaged with over the last few months—both for your forbearance and your patience.

I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to Anne Kelly in the Duchy office, who has stepped up magnificently and been a huge support.

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### Recruitment

I'm pleased to share some good news: we have “white smoke” over Princetown! We've successfully recruited to our new lead role—**Head of Communities and Nature**.

**Emma Magee**, whom many of you will know from her current role as Devon Catchment Partnership Manager at the Environment Agency, will be joining us on **30 June**.

We are also actively recruiting for an **Upland Land Agent**, with interviews taking place next week. This role will have a particular focus on Dartmoor.

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### Duchy Direction of Travel on Dartmoor

I want to briefly outline the Duchy's strategic direction for its Dartmoor estate. One of Emma's first tasks will be to begin shaping and delivering this vision—a collaborative approach for the Dartmoor landscape.

This will not be a strategy that sits on a shelf. I want to be absolutely clear that we are committed to a Dartmoor that delivers **positive impact for People, Place, and Planet**.

Whatever your personal view on the recent SSSI condition survey, we are united in recognising that things must change—and for the better.

We are committed to ensuring that change happens **respectfully**, and—crucially—in a way that supports people to **continue earning a living from hill farming** while delivering a host of public goods: from diverse habitats to better water quality in our rivers.

I felt it was important to be transparent about our direction, while also honest about the scale of the challenge. I'm not naïve—it won't be easy. Change rarely is.

But the Duchy is committed to working **with** all our stakeholders to achieve this **together**.

## Improvements to Office Efficiency

### Cost Efficiency Rationale for Transition to South Devon Accounting and QuickBooks Online (QBO)

Current Costs (Annual):

- Accountancy Fees: £1,000
- Postage Costs: £4,452
- Payroll Processing: £150

Total Annual Cost: **£5,602**

#### Proposal for Transition

Following recent discussions concerning the Council's financial systems and the potential development of a bespoke database, it is proposed that the Dartmoor Commoners' Council transitions to South Devon Accounting using QuickBooks Online (QBO).

This transition offers a modern, secure, and cost-effective solution—avoiding the significant cost and complexity of a bespoke system (potentially tens of thousands of pounds). It ensures statutory compliance, operational reliability, and long-term scalability.

#### Key Benefits of Transitioning to QBO

- QuickBooks Online Subscription: £24 + VAT/month (discounted rate via Catherine Flannery, South Devon Accounting)
- Payroll Module: £8 + VAT/month + £1 + VAT per employee (2 employees = £10 + VAT/month)
- Annual Payroll Services (£144 incl. VAT):
  - Full payroll processing
  - RTI submissions
  - Pension integration
  - P60 issuance
  - Employer's NI allowance claims (if applicable)
- Year-End Accounts (Independent Review): £250 + VAT
- Training and Support:
  - QuickBooks training for 2 users: £480 (Year 1 only)
  - Setup & support from South Devon Accounting: £480
  - Secretary transition and administration time (70 hrs @ £20): £1,400 (Year 1 only)
- Data Migration: Existing customer data from Access database can be imported easily.
- Integrated Payments: GoCardless for Direct Debits, Stripe as an additional option
- Ongoing Support: £40 + VAT per hour (billed in 15-minute increments)

#### Credentials:

South Devon Accounting:

- Fully qualified and compliant with the Dartmoor Commoners' Council Act 1985
- Continuity of Practice agreement in place
- Strong local references: Riverford Organic, Ian Bowman (Widecombe)

#### Financial Summary: Year 1

Description	Annual Cost (inc. VAT)
QuickBooks Subscriptions & Payroll	£489.60
Annual Payroll Service	£144.00
Annual Accounts Review	£300.00



QuickBooks Training	£480.00
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Secretary Admin Time (70 hrs @ £20/hr)	£1,400.00
QBO Setup & Support (10 hrs)	£480.00

<b>Total Investment - Year 1</b>	<b>£3,293.60</b>
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**Year 1 Savings** Compared to Current Postage: £4,452 – £3,293.60 **£1,158.40**

**Financial Summary: Year 2 (Ongoing Costs)**

Description	Annual Cost (inc. VAT)
QuickBooks Subscriptions & Payroll	£489.60
Annual Payroll Service	£144.00
Annual Accounts Review	£300.00
QBO Support (10 hrs)	£480.00
<b>Total Investment - Year 2</b>	<b>£1,413.60</b>

**Year 2 Savings** Compared to Current Postage: £4,452 – £1,413.60 = **£3,038.40**

**Conclusion:**

Transitioning to South Devon Accounting and QuickBooks Online represents a cost-saving, efficient, and future-proof solution. Year 1 offers notable savings and operational improvements, while Year 2 onward provides significantly reduced ongoing costs. This approach aligns with the Council's evolving needs and offers sustained administrative relief, operational continuity, and financial transparency—making it a prudent and progressive move.