

# New Forest Commoners Defence Association

Rt Hon Michael Gove MP  
Secretary of State  
Department of the Environment, Food & Rural  
Affairs  
Seacole Building  
2 Marsham Street  
London  
SW1P 4DF



14<sup>th</sup> May 2019

Dear Secretary of State,

## **New Forest Crown Freehold Properties**

You will be aware that the special qualities of the New Forest National Park depend upon the continued grazing of the landscape by commoners' livestock. Centuries of continuous common grazing have served to defend this landscape from development, so that it became of global importance for nature and kept freely accessible to all.

Today around 700 local people still practice commoning. This as a vocational commitment alongside their working lives, subsidised from their other income. A local home is essential to delivering on this commitment, as is a parcel of back-up land to care for livestock off the common grazing. The challenge of keeping cattle and ponies whilst living miles from their main grazing area is easy to understand, particularly when this is set alongside a working life in a particularly busy area of southern England. Extreme property values in the New Forest are making this the norm for the next generation of commoners, as the price premium for properties within the National Park boundary has now reached £300,000<sup>1</sup>, more than 15 times average local incomes.

Thankfully there are around 65 Crown holdings in the New Forest, built to meet past commercial forestry needs, before conservation rightly became the policy priority for this grazed landscape. Most of the forestry tenants were, of course, also commoners. In 1992,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.lloydsbankinggroup.com/Media/Press-Releases/2018-press-releases/lloyds-bank/national-parks-house-price-review-2018/>

when faced with the potential demise of commoning due to socio-economic pressures, and following extensive study of all options, the Secretary of State (John Gummer) endorsed the recommendations of the Illingworth Report<sup>2</sup>, that the holdings should be let to commoners at affordable rents, set at 15% of income.

The Secretary of State wrote to the Forestry Commission saying that:

*“Introduction of the measures we have agreed ... should go a long way to ensure that the unique features of the Forest are secured for future generations”*

On 24th July 2006 the DEFRA Minister, Ben Bradshaw, restated this policy, telling the Commons that the properties were being retained in the New Forest to support commoning, and that the proportion let to commoners would continue to rise (from 44%), as operational forestry needs decline.

The Minister stated:

*“Two criteria underpin the retention of properties in the forest. The first is to provide opportunities for affordable housing, with associated back-up land for practising commoners and the second is to provide affordable local accommodation for commission employees in key posts when there are operational reasons for staff to be based in the forest”<sup>3</sup>*

This direct support to commoning over the quarter century from 1992 has made a substantive and positive difference, keeping our cultural heritage intact and maintaining the extensive grazing of the New Forest against the rising pressures being faced.

The Illingworth Report also recommended the development of new holdings for rent beyond the Crown holdings, yet even 28 years later we are still struggling to bring the first of these to fruition. This is under a local partnership led by the New Forest Trust charity and without the involvement of the Forestry Commission. Affordable lettings of land and homes remain as crucial to commoning today as they ever have been, and the Crown properties will remain the primary source.

Since 2016 it has been made clear to us by the current Deputy Surveyor that Forestry England has been implementing a change of policy, of moving to open market rents, advertised to all Commission staff in the region, regardless of New Forest operational need, before commoners. If any are made available to commoners they will go to the highest bidder above the Commission's set minimum rent, rather than to those best placed to contribute to sustaining Forest grazing. The sole motivation is financial.

The rents now being demanded for new lettings place them out of reach for most genuine commoners. The Commission is now demanding rents from commoners of *at least*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.realnewforest.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Government-Policy-on-Commoners-Housing-Land.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Hansard, 24<sup>th</sup> July 2006, Col 715

£1450/month, plus outbuildings<sup>4</sup>: This represents more than 70% of the *average* disposable income in our local authority area. For young commoners and those in rural trades these are impossible rents, often well in excess of 100% of their income.

The Forestry Commission now describes any concession from market rents as an “*opportunity cost*” for the Commission; against potential revenues as a weekend cottage for the wealthy. The Commission is also unilaterally setting conditions that make the properties untenable for commoning. The intention is very clear: To bring these properties to the open market, at open market rents after failing to secure operational or commoning tenants at the rents being demanded.

In 2017, in response to our concerns at substantial rent increases for current leaseholders, Dr Therese Coffey MP replied to a written question from Sir Desmond Swayne MP (after officials sought input from the Forestry Commission). Dr Coffey stated that a Commission-initiated review of the Illingworth policies would:

*“Include consultation with all interested parties in the New Forest. I expect the Forestry Commission to work with those with an interest and present their findings and any planned changes in approach to Ministers for approval”*<sup>5</sup>

There has been no consultation on the change that has been implemented, and no proposal to ministers.

We have tried repeatedly to engage positively, sympathetic to the Commission’s financial situation, but have faced a simple ‘fait accompli’. We are also unaware of any dialogue at all with the National Park Authority on this crucial issue. This is a flagrant breach of the 2018 Accord between the Forestry Commission and National Parks England. Nor has there been any consultation on what has happened with the Friends of the New Forest, or the New Forest Verderers.

Instead Forestry England, as it is now branded, has continued along the course in 2016 it chose for the Crown properties in 2016; of raising rents towards market levels and advertising the properties on the open market. One by one Crown holdings long-occupied by commoners and suitable as a base for commoning are being lost. The cottages are being separated from their land and outbuildings for the sole purpose of revenue maximisation and with no regard to their value to the New Forest. We would be happy to provide a list of these cottages and landholdings allocated in breach of Government policy since 2016, if required.

The Ministers Mandate for the management of the Crown Lands<sup>6</sup> demands that Forestry England puts the needs of the New Forest ahead of its own financial interests. The agency receives around £54 million of direct taxpayer subsidy in order to fulfil these special obligations. It also receives substantial taxpayer revenue from the Verderers Higher Level Stewardship scheme, primarily for projects related to the rare habitats maintained by our

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.rightmove.co.uk/property-to-rent/property-81550118.html>

<sup>5</sup> Hansard, WA 109500, 2 November 2017

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.realnewforest.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Ministers-Mandate-1999.pdf>

grazing livestock, and of course from its many recreational licences and commercial campsites which are marketed with our grazing livestock as a unique selling point.

It is now very clear that the Ministers Mandate is being been unilaterally subverted by Forestry England; with no review, and no recourse to Ministers for this change of policy. It is nothing short of disgraceful that a public body should act in this way. This is a policy of covert exploitation and privatisation of Crown assets.

As commoners we are each deeply committed to the New Forest, its past and its future. We have an active group of young commoners who are keen to continue the practice but unable to rent a home close to the grazing. A typical holding in the New Forest is now worth at least £1 million to buy and £2000 a month to rent, whilst local incomes remain low and the costs of keeping livestock rise.

It is tragic that the Crown holdings at the heart of the New Forest are now systematically being lost, and that a public body is not only defying ministerial policy but also pursuing a course of action that it knows can only cause lasting harm to this landscape.

The time has come to review the arrangements for the management of these holdings. The conflict between Forestry England's national financial interests and the costs of supporting the grazing of the New Forest mean that the agency is unable to put the New Forest first in this regard.

I would be grateful for the opportunity to discuss this with you as a matter of urgency.

Yours sincerely

**Tony Hockley** PhD FRSA

Chair, New Forest Commoners Defence Association

Copies:

Dr Julia Aglionby, Chief Executive, Foundation for Common Land  
Minette Batters, NFU  
Sir Christopher Chope MP  
Oliver Crosthwaite-Eyre, Chair, New Forest National Park Authority  
John Glen MP  
Julian Glover, Chair, Protected Landscapes Review  
Rt Hon Dr Julian Lewis MP  
Lord Manners, Official Verderer, New Forest  
Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP  
Neil Parish MP, EFRA Committee  
Bruce Rothney, Deputy Surveyor, Forestry England  
Sir Harry Studholme, Chair, Forestry Commission  
Rt Hon Sir Desmond Swayne TD MP  
John Ward, Chair, Friends of the New Forest  
William Ziegler, Chair, New Forest Trust