

New Forest Commoners Defence Association

Principles for future support to New Forest Commoning

Introduction

The efforts of commoners over centuries have protected and created the New Forest that everyone has come to value for its accessible, grazed landscape, its cultural heritage (not least the New Forest pony), and its exceptional biodiversity. Nevertheless, commoning faces mounting challenges, and the New Forest risks becoming a victim of its own success. Its popularity and accessibility have made it the most expensive national park in Britain, with average property values now reaching 15 times average local incomes. The next generation of commoners will find it even harder to survive within an increasingly costly and busy environment.

Support through the SPS & latterly BPS has made a significant contribution to meeting these very real challenges. The largest grazing herds have been kept going for generations despite rising pressures of time and cost. SPS and BPS support has enabled these longstanding commoners to withstand the mounting pressures, as well as allowing the next generation and new commoners to invest in the buildings, equipment, and land that will sustain their commoning into the future. Without such investment the future of commoning will be at serious risk given the social and economic pressures being faced. The public goods enjoyed as a result of this crucial investment have been exceptional, as detailed in the papers provided to ministers in July 2017.

For the past decade or more, New Forest Commoners have worked with DEFRA and RPA to incorporate the support given by SPS and latterly BPS into their farm businesses. Given the unique nature of commoning within the New Forest, especially its environmental and cultural aspects, this has not been an easy task, and has given rise to several unintended consequences; and used much resource – on both sides. Conversely, the locally designed, managed and implemented environmental stewardship schemes (CSS and subsequently replaced by the current HLS – two of the largest single schemes in England) have been highly successful over the same period, delivering direct headage-based payments to New Forest Commoners as well as a raft of other support benefits such as the New Forest Land Advisory Service, landscape restoration and derogation implementation and microchipping for commoned ponies to name but a few of many.

The CDA therefore believes that a support mechanism that is designed and monitored locally will ensure that the return on investment in terms of public goods is even higher in the future than is already being delivered. Importantly, it should be recognised that there is a considerable framework already in place to facilitate the building of a new support scheme post Brexit and the CAP.

The Commoners Defence Association hopes that future direct support to commoning will be bespoke for the New Forest, and designed based upon the locally-sensitive HLS mechanisms.

General Principles

1. There should be a **single** “all encompassing” scheme for the common grazing land within the New Forest Perambulation (including the adjacent commons).
2. The total annual value of a New Forest Scheme should be agreed based on natural capital and cultural heritage, and not determined on an “eligible area” basis.
3. The New Forest’s common land should not have a national commercially-natured scheme imposed upon it, although any such national scheme (such as a BPS equivalent) should still be available to individuals over commoner’s holdings and other privately occupied land within the New Forest.

Implementation Principles

1. The total value of the scheme should not be less than the sum of all existing scheme values (it was estimated that the value of BPS claims over the New Forest Common Land currently totals circa £3.2m with the HLS being worth £1.6m per annum – the total value of Leader grants to commoners should also be determined and included in this calculation). Aspects of the current Heritage Lottery-funded “Our Past, Our Future” might also be incorporated to support ongoing work related to protection of the cultural heritage of commoning. Furthermore, the value of funding ringfenced for supporting the commoning system should not be less than the combined value of the BPS and the VGS.
2. The agreement should be a partnership between those organisations that have a land management role within the New Forest. A board comprising of representatives of these organisations should be established (the CDA’s voting stake on this board should reflect the proportion of the total scheme’s funding which supports the commoning system).
3. A headage-based payment is in reality the only fair and practical means for calculating direct payments to commoners. This is because each individual grazing animals contribute to the many ‘public goods’ that the commoning system collectively delivers. Any headage-based payment should either be tiered and capped, and qualifying periods imposed and include a basic “maintenance” payment to qualifying commoners with additional enhancements on top (such as for further environmental and cultural work, young commoners and new entrants), or be a bespoke contract to commoners tailoring the payment to the public goods provided.
4. The rules concerning the payments should be designed and reviewed locally (not nationally). These should be reviewed and amended if appropriate, to ensure that the scheme is flexible and can react to changes in practices or environmental demands.
5. The payments themselves should be administered by an independent government agency, or similar, as opposed to being administered by a scheme stakeholder.
The CDA is in support of BPS applicants being able to take a lump sum as it will break the link between financial support and future marking fees.