

YC – Bridges presentment, November 2024

Dear Official Verderer's, Verderers and members of the court, my name is Daisy Slocombe and I am here today to represent the Young Commoner's Committee.

We want to raise our concerns, with you, about bridges in the New Forest.

We are concerned how these changes Forestry England are proposing will affect the way we enact our rights to common. For example, when we need to check our stock, particularly in the winter when we would do this from horseback and need access over many of the rivers in the forest, which could be flooded, bridges are the only safe option. We would like to understand Forestry England's thought process on how they have chosen which bridges will be maintained as access for horse riders and which won't. It doesn't seem as though they have taken into account our imperative requirements to manage our stock throughout the year.

Equally, it is paramount that we have access to all areas of the forest for emergency access. What do Forestry England suggest we do when we have an injured animal stuck on one side of a non-accessible bridge?

It is unclear how Forestry England anticipate preventing livestock from using bridges that are no longer suitable for equestrian access. If for example, Forestry England have said bridges are only suitable for pedestrians and one of our livestock crosses that bridge and gets stuck, because the bridge isn't up to spec for the weight of a pony or cow, who is legally liable?

As we know, livestock have a haunt, their areas are shared with their offspring within their herd. Many of their haunts will utilise bridges to access the whole area. We know from historic evidence from when the roads were fenced that ponies haunts can be significantly affected by changes in access. At that time there were ponies that became poor in winter because they could no longer access their winter forage. Our concern here is that this could become a welfare issue.

Our committee are appreciative of the few bridges which have been repaired and the high quality of work which has been actioned. The bridge at Withybeds being an example.

The YC committee would like to see a copy of the map showing which bridges will remain in situ and of those which ones have vehicle access and equestrian access. We ask the Verderers to request such a map from Forestry England and share it with the relevant stakeholders, such as ourselves, who need to see and comment on the final plan.

This is yet another restriction on commoning that as Young Commoner's we are gravely worried about our future in the forest.