

Working to Protect the New Forest



Commoners' back-up grazing in the New Forest: extent and distribution

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1. Introduction

The commoning system of the New Forest underpins the area's ecosystem. The grazing and browsing of depastured livestock maintain the wide variety of heath, bog and woodland that characterise the landscape and mosaic of habitats covered by national and international designations for nature conservation. The area's beauty and relative accessibility also bring millions of day visitors and holiday makers to the area each year, adding considerably to the area's economy. With its annual round of drifts, pony sales and point to point races, the commoning community is also a vital element of the New Forest's history and cultural heritage.

The visible aspect of this system is the small groups of ponies, donkeys and cattle that are so familiar to residents and visitors, while the management of these animals, both on and off the Forest, is almost completely invisible to anyone who isn't aware of the reality of the New Forest.

2. Commoning in the New Forest

The New Forest is one of the most important British sites for nature conservation. Bordered by the conurbations of Southampton to the east and Bournemouth to the west and only 90 miles from London, it includes a diverse pattern of heaths, mires, grassland and woodland found at this scale nowhere else in lowland England.

The importance of the Forest to nature conservation is reflected in the Forest's commons and statutory inclosures being designated under UK legislation as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). SSSI status is then overlaid by designations reflecting the European importance of the Forest's bird populations (Special Protection Area) along with habitats and selected species (Special Area of Conservation). The global importance of the Forest is then recognised in its designation as a wetland of international importance under the Ramsar convention.

The New Forest's citation as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (notified under Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981) describes it as the *'largest area of unsown vegetation in lowland England and includes the representation on a large scale of habitat formations formerly common but now fragmented and rare in lowland western Europe.'*¹

¹ <https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/PDFsForWeb/Citation/1003036.pdf>

The citation continues by stating that:

‘...the New Forest has survived largely because of the persistence of a pastoral economy based on the exercise of common rights of grazing and mast together with protection afforded by Crown ownership. This, and the management of vegetation in the Open Forest through burning and cutting programmes, administered by the Forestry Commission on the Crown Lands, maintains the quality of the grazings, ensures the prevention of natural succession and encourages local diversity in plant communities. The pastoral economy in turn depends on the continued existence of a small community of commoners who make up a discrete social unit and this combination of natural and cultural elements contributes to the maintenance of the New Forest habitats.’

In his book **The New Forest**, Colin Tubbs wrote that ‘*Because the future of the Commoners is so inextricably interwoven with that of the Forest itself (and it is better to think of the two as part of one social and ecological system) it is important to understand the history and socio-economics of the Commoners as a community, and the factors controlling the numbers of animals they have depastured on the Forest.*’²

In 2005 the New Forest was designated as a national park, increasing the protection of the area’s landscape. All statutory bodies have a duty under Section 62(1) of the Environment Act 1995 to take forward the two National Park purposes. These are:

- *To conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the area;*
- *To promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the National Park by the public.*

The following Section (62[2]) states that:

- *...if it appears that there is a conflict between those purposes, (the National Park Authority) shall attach greater weight to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the area comprised in the National Park.*

The Section 62 duty has been reinforced through section 245 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act (2023) which requires authorities to ‘seek to further’ the statutory purposes of national parks in undertaking their functions within or affecting the National Park. This is an active duty and requires authorities to be able to demonstrate how they have sought to further the interests of the National Park.³

On its website the New Forest National Park Authority sets out its role of supporting commoning by stating that ‘*The New Forest has a long and proud history of commoning: the system whereby even today certain people have the right to release animals onto the open*

² Colin R. Tubbs: **The New Forest** New Forest Ninth Centenary Trust, Lyndhurst 2001 (p112).

³ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-protected-landscapes-duty/guidance-for-relevant-authorities-on-seeking-to-further-the-purposes-of-protected-landscapes#:~:text=conserving%20and%20enhancing%20the%20natural,those%20areas%20by%20the%20public>

*forest and collect firewood. It has given the Forest its mosaic of grazed habitats and influences many aspects of the local communities. The New Forest remains one of the few extensive lowland commons where common rights are still widely practised and a strong commoning culture continues.*⁴

In 1991 a census of commoning households was carried out across the New Forest⁵. Respondents stated that, beyond the serious problem of very high property prices, the availability and cost of grazing land is the greatest threat to the viability of their commoning, especially to young Commoners trying to establish their business. At that time the threat was mainly viewed as coming from recreational horse keeping, but over the ensuing years, housing development and environmental schemes have placed ever increasing pressure on the limited supply of grazing land in and around the New Forest. Awareness of this situation is now widely acknowledged, and both local planning authorities include reference to the need to protect such land in their adopted local plans.

Locally, the land used for the support of livestock off the open forest is known as ‘back-up land’ and is a much sought after resource. Despite its importance to the continued survival of commoning in the New Forest, presently there is no measure of the extent of such land, its tenure or vulnerability to loss. Agricultural surveys undertaken by government agencies and other organisations identify grassland or pasture as an agricultural category, but this includes all farmland and recreational uses as well as back-up land. It is the vulnerability of back-up land when competing with more profitable uses or development which makes its retention as part of the commoning economy such a concern. For most commoners, back-up land is an essential part of the total land resource which makes their work economically viable.

In order to gain some measure of the extent and location of back-up land, the New Forest Association has undertaken a survey of all Commoners turning animals onto the Forest and Adjacent Commons in 2024, with the aim of establishing how many acres of back-up land each Commoner owns or rents and where the land is located across the parishes of the whole New Forest District Council area. The present report sets out the results of this survey and uses the information included in the Verderers’ Marking Fee Register⁶ (MFR) to model these results across the Commoning population.

The research has been carried out in collaboration with GeoData at Southampton University and with the support of the Verderers of the New Forest and the New Forest Commoners Defence Association. Tables relating to the data are shown throughout the document. Maps and the Appendix are set out at the end.

⁴ <https://www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/conservation/supporting-commoning/>

⁵ Jo Ivey ‘Commoners of the New Forest: A study based on census data’ University of Southampton 1991

⁶ The Verderers’ Marking Fee Register is a list of all the payments made for the right to depasture animals on the common land of the New Forest and Adjacent Commons. Marking fees are the annual payments made to turn animals out on the common grazing of the New Forest. Presently, a fee of £29.00 per annum is payable on ponies, cattle and donkeys on the Forest. On the Northern and Western Commons lower rates of £14.00 for ponies and donkeys and £3.50 for cattle are charged. The Register includes the name and address of the Commoner and the number of each animal species they have paid for in the present year.

3. New Forest commoning and the need for back-up land

The New Forest has complex boundaries covering the open forest and the surrounding area. As shown in the attached maps (pages 21-22), New Forest District Council encompasses almost all the National Park and the 'open forest' largely owned by the Crown, as well as the surrounding parishes. It also includes a number of Downland parishes to the northwest of the district. The National Park boundary lies mostly within the New Forest District Council area in Hampshire, and extends to the north into Wiltshire and Test Valley.

The core New Forest parishes⁷ all lie entirely within the boundary of the National Park, where the National Park Authority is the sole statutory planning authority. They have limited areas of grazing land, being mostly heath and woodland. Residential property and land in these parishes both command very high prices, making them largely inaccessible to young people wishing to start up in commoning.

The core parishes are surrounded to the east, south and west by a ring of parishes⁸ the majority of which lie partly within the National Park and under the National Park Authority's planning control, and partly outside it, where planning is under the control of New Forest District Council. Whilst property in these areas also commands relatively high prices, they also include areas of more affordable housing and more extensive grazing land, both of which may be more accessible to Commoners setting up their businesses.

In 2024 more than 700 marking fees were paid on nearly 9000 animals - ponies, cattle, donkeys, sheep and pigs - many of which spend only part of the year on the open forest and all of which need to be managed and cared for throughout the year. Much of this activity takes place on private land or in barns in the agricultural areas within or adjacent to the Forest. Hay and silage are made and animals monitored during calving, when injured or unwell, or readied for sale. During the winter many animals are removed from the heath to ensure that they do not lose condition when grazing is poor and shelter is minimal.

Table 1, on the next page, shows the distribution by parish of Commoners turning animals (mostly ponies and cows) out to graze in the New Forest recorded in the 2024 Marking Fee Register. The table shows that Commoners come from almost every parish in the New Forest District Council area, and a small number live some distance away. Almost without exception, these animal owners use private grazing land to support their animals at times when they are not depastured on the Crown lands or Adjacent Commons. Some of this land is owned by the Commoner, some rented from other landowners and some used through an informal arrangement with people who own land, but choose not to use it for their own purposes.

The lack of detailed knowledge of the commoning system means that even those who are aware that the animals are owned and managed by their owners are often poorly informed about the way in which commoning operates across a wide range of models. These different

⁷ These parishes are Hale, Hyde, Woodgreen, Bramshaw, Minstead, Lyndhurst, Denny Lodge, Brockenhurst, Sway, Burley, Boldre, East Boldre and Beaulieu.

⁸ Copythorne, Totton & Eling, Netley Marsh, Ashurst & Colbury, Marchwood, Hythe & Dibden, Fawley, Exbury & Lepe, Lymington & Pennington, Hordle, New Milton, Bransgore, Sopley, Ringwood, Ellingham, Harbridge & Ibsley, Fordingbridge, Sandleheath, Whitsbury, Rockborne, Breamore and Martin.

parts of the community vary widely: a number of old families can trace their commoning history back generations and their members are spread across the Forest and beyond. They often turn out quite large numbers of animals, which may be widely distributed across the Forest, and belong to several different family members. These animals may come from long genetic lines and are the result of breeding programmes aimed at improving certain characteristics, both physical and behavioural, that make them best suited to living on the rough grazing of the Forest as well as being more saleable on the open market.

Table 1: Parish distribution of Marking Fees paid in 2024

| Parish | Number of fees paid | Share of total |
|-------------------|---------------------|----------------|
| Ashurst & Colbury | 6 | 1% |
| Beaulieu | 40 | 6% |
| Boldre | 32 | 5% |
| Bramshaw | 51 | 7% |
| Bransgore | 3 | >1% |
| Brockenhurst | 51 | 7% |
| Burley | 31 | 4% |
| Copythorne | 51 | 7% |
| Denny Lodge | 34 | 5% |
| East Boldre | 22 | 3% |
| Ellingham | 46 | 7% |
| Exbury & Lepe | 5 | 1% |
| Fawley | 38 | 5% |
| Fordingbridge | 8 | 1% |
| Godshill | 17 | 2% |
| Hale | 9 | 1% |
| Hordle | 10 | 1% |
| Hyde | 27 | 4% |
| Hythe & Dibden | 12 | 2% |
| Lymington | 13 | 2% |
| Lyndhurst | 24 | 3% |
| Marchwood | 13 | 2% |
| Minstead | 37 | 5% |
| Netley Marsh | 8 | 1% |
| New Milton | 12 | 2% |
| Ringwood | 9 | 1% |
| Sopley | 2 | >1% |
| Sway | 22 | 3% |
| Totton | 14 | 2% |
| Whitsbury | 2 | >1% |
| Woodgreen | 6 | 1% |
| Outside NFDC area | 53 | 7% |
| Total | 706 | 100% |

Table 2 sets out the number of marking fees paid for ponies and cattle depastured in 2024. The number of marking fees paid is larger than the number of Commoners since some pay more than one fee, but the table does give a broad indication of the distribution of the number of ponies and cows between Commoners.

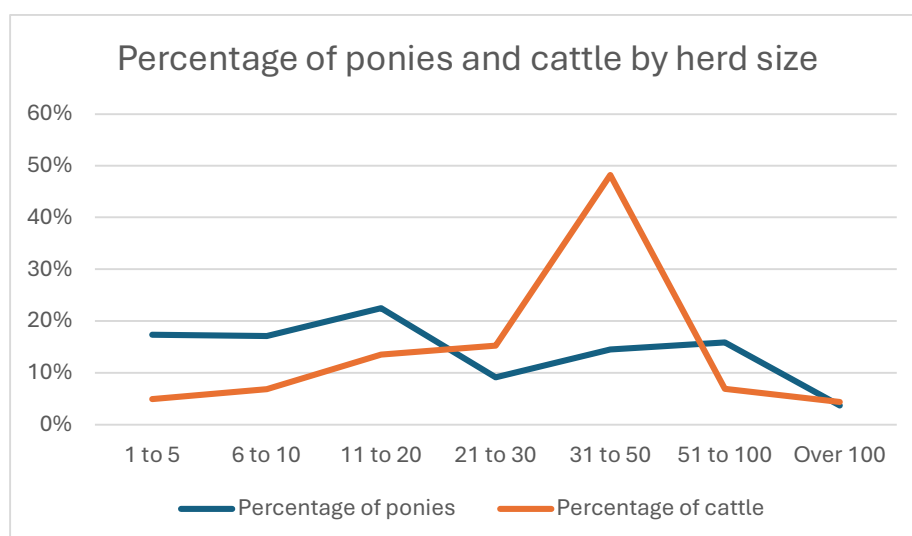
Table 2: Marking fees paid by herd size: ponies and cattle (2024)

| Ponies and cattle for which marking fee paid | | | | |
|--|------------------------|------------|------------------------|------------|
| | Ponies | | Cattle | |
| Number of animals | Number of marking fees | Percentage | Number of marking fees | Percentage |
| 1 to 5 | 371 | 53% | 50 | 7% |
| 6 to 10 | 126 | 18% | 27 | 4% |
| 11 to 20 | 88 | 12% | 26 | 4% |
| 21 to 30 | 20 | 3% | 18 | 3% |
| 31 to 50 | 21 | 3% | 38 | 5% |
| 51 to 100 | 14 | 2% | 3 | >1% |
| Over 100 | 2 | >1% | 1 | >1% |
| Sub total | 642 | 91% | 163 | 13% |
| None | 64 | 9% | 543 | 77% |
| Total | 706 | 100% | 706 | 100% |

The table shows that over 90% of Commoners paid to turn out ponies in 2024 of which more than three quarters (77%) were herds of fewer than 10. Only 13% of Commoners turned out cattle herds of any size, and over half (53%) of this group turned out more than 10 animals.

Chart 1, below, shows that whilst the number of ponies owned by Commoners with different sized herds is fairly evenly spread across the whole pony population, the greatest number of cows are part of large herds: almost 50% comprise between 31 and 50 animals. Such herds require extensive areas of back-up land to graze or, if they are housed in barns over winter, to supply the fodder and bedding to support them.

Chart 1: Distribution of herd sizes for ponies and cattle



The wide variation in the type of business run by Commoners is evidence that back-up land is used to fulfil a range of purposes. Some Commoners have a few acres which are used to bring in animals that need extra care, to put them to a bull or stallion, or to finish youngstock ready for market. Larger acreages may be used to cut hay or silage, or to grow feed crops for their own animals, or as a source of income. A few farmers who also turn their animals out on the Forest may have extensive other agricultural interests with land spread widely across Hampshire, Wiltshire and Dorset.

‘Back-up land’: a definition

It is important that commoning in the New Forest is characterised as farming practice. While for some it may be viewed as loss making - and perhaps even a hobby - its basis is as a traditional form of extensive farming in balance with the environment that sustains it. The definition of back-up land used in this report was first employed in a report on the extent of back-up land written in 2001⁹:

Back-up land is the agricultural land used by Commoners to sustain their commoning activity and wider business arrangements. It may be used for any of the following activities closely associated with the modern commoning economy in the New Forest:

- *to bring stock off the Forest during the winter, or at any other time for welfare reasons – because of injury, sickness or deteriorating condition - and to facilitate activities such as calving or the finishing of animals ready for sale;*
- *to grow, cut and store feed crops for commoned stock, or for sale as part of the commoning economy;*
- *to graze horses/ponies for use as riding animals in the management of the commoned herd, or young stock which are being brought on to be sold as riding/driving ponies;*
- *to keep non depastured cattle, sheep and pigs, and other livestock (poultry, goats etc) which form part of the agricultural economy of the Commoner.*

4. The 2024 survey

The present study is based on information gathered from a short questionnaire (see Appendix) sent to all practising Commoners included in the Verderers’ Marking Fee Register for 2024 via a link to the survey form emailed from the Verderers’ office. Anonymised animal numbers information was extracted from the Marking Fee Register itself. The form collected information anonymously and land was only identified according to the parish in which it is located to

⁹ Jo Ivey ‘Back-up grazing land in the New Forest: Report based on a questionnaire survey of practicing Commoners’ report written for the New Forest Committee 2001

ensure Commoners' anonymity was strictly observed. A response was received from 134 of the 706 Commoners on the Marking Fee Register, a response rate of 19%.

The relatively low response rate raises the possibility of bias, so survey data was compared with that held about the commoning community in the Marking Fee Register. This comparison shows a broad correlation between the distribution of livestock numbers held by respondents and those on the Marking Fee Register (a positive correlation of 0.88 for ponies and 0.99 for cattle: 1.00 being a perfect positive correlation). Furthermore, responses were received from Commoners living in the majority of parishes within the New Forest District Council area (26 out of 32). The full analysis is set out in the Appendix.

The questionnaire included two main question areas. The first was aimed at identifying the location and extent of back-up land used to support respondents' commoning activity, their need for further grazing and any loss of land in the past five years. The second section focussed on the numbers of animals depastured in 2024 and the number brought into their back-up land during the winter. Finally, respondents were invited to make any comments that they felt were relevant to the present situation of back-up land in the New Forest.

Back-up land identified by the survey

Respondents were asked to record the parish in which their main area of back-up land is located, as well as any other areas they use to support their commoning activities. As set out in Table 3, on the next page and Map 1 (page 21), the survey identified a total of 4748 acres (1921 hectares) of back-up land used by respondents, which is an average of 35 acres (14 hectares) per Commoner. However, the amount of land used by each Commoner varies from one acre up to 400 (162 hectares), and the survey responses included one person who reported that they do not presently have any back-up land for their animals.

Forty-three Commoners said that they have a second area of back-up land, either in the same parish or elsewhere, and 14 identified a third. Responses revealed that almost three-quarters (72%) of Commoners have their main area of back-up land in the same parish as their holding/house. While almost two thirds (64%) of all back-up fields are located in the same parish as the Commoner's holding, these account for only 50% of the total area of back-up land used by respondents, with some of the largest acreages being 'outside the area'.

Table 3: Area of back-up land by parish: survey responses

| Parish | Acreage |
|---------------------------------|---------|
| Ashurst and Colbury | 15 |
| Beaulieu | 390 |
| Boldre | 58 |
| Bramshaw | 322 |
| Bransgore | 201 |
| Brockenhurst | 236 |
| Burley | 64 |
| Copythorne | 168 |
| Denny Lodge | 195 |
| East Boldre | 153 |
| Ellingham, Harbridge and Ibsley | 166 |
| Exbury and Lepe | 90 |
| Fawley | 43 |
| Fordingbridge | 174 |
| Godshill | 2 |
| Hale | 19 |
| Hyde | 130 |
| Hythe and Dibden | 16 |
| Lymington and Pennington | 84 |
| Lyndhurst | 41 |
| Marchwood | 328 |
| Milford on Sea | 15 |
| Minstead | 106 |
| Netley Marsh | 68 |
| New Milton | 20 |
| Outside local area | 1104 |
| Ringwood | 443 |
| Sopley | 28 |
| Sway | 72 |
| Grand Total | 4748 |

Tenure of back-up land

Respondents were asked about the tenure of the back-up land that they use to support their commoning. Table 4, on the next page, indicates that 41% of the pieces of back-up land used by Commoners are owned by them, with a further 41% being rented and 17% accessed through an informal arrangement. When the area covered by the land under each tenure is compared, it is clear that almost two thirds (63%) of such land is rented and a further 7% used under an informal arrangement, with less than a third (30%) being owned by Commoners.

Table 4: Tenure of back up land: survey responses

| Tenure of back up land | Percentage of back-up land locations | Percentage of total area of back-up land |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| Owned | 41% | 30% |
| Rented | 41% | 63% |
| Informal arrangement | 18% | 7% |

Respondents who rent the back-up land were asked the length of tenancy they have on the land. As Table 5 shows almost half (48%) of land is rented on an annual basis, with 27% having an agreement between 2 and 5 years. Only 18% having a more secure agreement of over 5 years.

Table 5: Length of tenancy: survey responses

| Length of tenancy | Percentage |
|-------------------|------------|
| One year or less | 48% |
| 2 to 5 years | 27% |
| Over 5 years | 18% |
| Uncertain | 7% |

Uses for back-up land

Respondents were asked the uses they have for their back-up land. As Table 6 shows, the majority of respondents identified multiple uses for the land and, while the most widespread is winter grazing for depastured stock (74% of responses), as well as providing safe grazing for animals that need attention (85%), over a third of respondents cut silage and/or hay on their land. Other management uses include summer grazing (43%) and preparing animals for sale (33%). Small numbers also said that they graze riding animals on their land, use it to wean and bring on youngstock, or for other livestock such as pigs.

Table 6: Uses for back-up land

| Use of back-up land | Percentage of respondents |
|---|---------------------------|
| Winter grazing for my animals | 74% |
| Summer grazing for my animals | 43% |
| For animals in need of extra care/attention | 85% |
| To cut hay/silage | 35% |
| To prepare animals for sale | 33% |
| To graze riding animals used for stock management | 4% |
| For other uses related to my commoning | 12% |

When asked whether they bring their animals in for the winter, 62% of cattle owners and 53% of pony owners said that all their animals come in for the winter.

The loss of back-up land in the last five years

Almost a quarter (24%) of respondents said that they have lost back-up land in the last five years. The main reasons for this loss are set out in Table 7. The table shows that the most common reason for rented land to be lost is its sale by the owner. The next most likely reason is that the land is unsuitable, or the conditions placed on its use make the arrangement impractical¹⁰. Informal arrangements, by their nature are unstable and their loss makes up 13% of cases over the past five years.

Table 7: Loss of back-up land over the past 5 years

| Reason for loss of land | Percentage |
|---|------------|
| End of informal arrangement | 13% |
| End of tenancy | 8% |
| Land sold by owner | 42% |
| Too expensive or unaffordable rent increase | 8% |
| Rented out to someone else | 4% |
| Use limited by unsuitable conditions | 17% |
| Land to be developed | 8% |

The need for more land to use as back-up

Respondents were then asked whether they needed, but had been unable to acquire, more back-up land to continue their commoning. Forty-two percent said that they did need more land, requiring a total of 635 additional acres (257 hectares) for those responding to the survey.

This group was then asked the main reasons for their failure to secure more land. Almost all respondents said that there is no land available locally and that anything that becomes available is too expensive or too far from their home or holding. One Commoner said: *'I'm desperately seeking more land. I'd like to be able to grow on some ponies. The rent on my land is almost as much as the rent on my house. My current grazing for my forest stock and riding ponies is so insecure and I'm constantly worrying that I may lose it due to death/sale etc. I really want to expand my stock but cannot without suitable grazing.'*

¹⁰ Reasons given include:

- Numbers limited and no supplementary feeding allowed;
- some was unaffordable and was too wet through the winter;
- the owner was informed that grazing animals on the ground increases ticks so now cuts the grass with their lawnmower

Respondents' comments about the problems of acquiring and keeping back-up land

Respondents were invited to add any comments they felt would be helpful to the survey and over half of them did so. The most frequent point made is that back-up land isn't available. In some cases this was felt to be a local issue with suitable land in short supply in their area of the Forest, while others thought that grazing land is difficult to find anywhere in and around the open forest.

Commoners made the point that there is an expectation that owners have sufficient land for the number of animals depastured, even though this may only be used for part of the year. Some also pointed out that it is better to have enough land to grow the hay and silage that their animals need rather than being at the mercy of a volatile market. One respondent said that they had sold their animals due to lack of grazing.

Where land is available, other factors influence people's access to it, the most significant factor being the cost. This is often based on rents paid by recreational horse owners who pay per head of stock to be grazed, whereas agricultural rents are based on a more affordable set price per acre. Some Commoners pay livery rates for their ponies, limiting their ability to expand their herds because of the high cost per head, while one respondent made the point that any land that comes available in their parish is let on the basis of sealed bids, making it financially unviable to their commoning business.

Other constraints on the use of grazing land include problems of access to the land with semi-feral animals which cannot be led on a halter, constraints placed on its use, such as no winter grazing, restrictions on numbers or no supplementary feeding (which is usual in environmental agreements that allow landowners to claim significant payments) and inadequate field facilities or maintenance, including poor fencing or lack of water supply.

A number of respondents pointed to the ways in which the changing attitudes of landowners affect the type and length of agreement they are able to negotiate. Many new owners don't understand commoning and are reluctant to rent to commoners. Property owners who have acquired land with the purchase of a house are sometimes known to have re-designated their fields as garden and cut the grass with a ride-on lawnmower, despite this being a change of use under planning law. And it is often the case that local estates and large farm owners are no longer as sympathetic to Commoners as they were in the past. As a result of changing attitudes informal arrangements may be terminated early (as in the case of the owner who was informed that grazing animals increases ticks and now cuts the grass with a lawnmower) and rental agreements are now often made for a single year, making long term planning impossible.

5. The wider picture: back-up land and animal numbers in 2024

Marking Fee Register reconciliation

The second section of the survey asked respondents to detail the number of animals that they had turned out in 2024. This information was used to calculate the ratio of animal numbers to the area of back-up land in order that a wider analysis of the distribution of back-up land for all Commoners could be modelled.

Analysis based on the 122 respondents to the survey (those who had who had included figures for area of back-up land and animal numbers) indicated that this group turned out 1235 ponies and 764 cows. These numbers were converted into Livestock Units (LUs)¹¹ to give a single figure for each Commoner. Those respondents included in this part of the analysis also gave replies which indicate that they own or rent 4348.63 acres (1860 hectares) of back-up land, leading to the following calculation:

$$\begin{aligned}(1235 \times 0.8) + 764 &= 1752 \text{ livestock units} \\ 4348.63 / 1752 &= 2.48 \text{ acres (1 hectare) per LU depastured}\end{aligned}$$

Based on this equation, the animal numbers paid for in the 2024 Marking Fee Register were used to estimate the area of back-up land needed to support them, and how this would be distributed between the parishes of the New Forest District Council area. A total of 5506 ponies and 3082 cows were paid for, converting into 7487 LUs across the Forest and Commons. These data indicate that a total of 18,827 acres (7619 hectares) is required to support the LUs listed as being turned out last year.

However, this figure covers certain Commoners who are unlikely to use back-up land within the New Forest District Council area, leading to a reduction in the area of land required in the district. A few of these Commoners live well away from the Forest (in Devon, Herefordshire and Surrey), whilst others live outside the New Forest District Council area and may reasonably be presumed to have back-up land outside the district. The exclusion of these Commoners from the total of back-up land required in the New Forest District Council area, results in a figure of 17,683 acres (7156 hectares). This distribution is set out in Table 8, on the next page and Map 2 (page 21).

Analysed by the parish from which the Commoners turn out their animals, the data indicate that need for back-up land is spread widely across the Forest, with high levels of demand in most of the central parishes. In order to estimate pressure on grazing land across the New Forest, the Living England dataset produced by Natural England (NE) was used to compare the estimated area of back-up land required in each parish with the corresponding total area of 'improved grassland'.¹²

¹¹ Rural Payments Agency categories:

- Cattle over 2 years = 1 (without further information regarding the composition of herds, each cow on which a marking fee has been paid is classed as 1 LU).
- Pony / Donkey 0.8

¹² Living England Habitat Map (Phase 4). Definition of Improved grassland: 'This broad habitat type is characterised by vegetation dominated by a few fast-growing grasses on fertile neutral soils.'

Table 8: Acreage needed to support depastured stock identified in the Marking Fee Register (2024)

| Parish | Estimated total acres | Acres in NFDC area |
|-------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| Ashurst & Colbury | 35 | 35 |
| Beaulieu | 962 | 962 |
| Boldre | 806 | 806 |
| Bramshaw | 1773 | 1773 |
| Bransgore | 24 | 24 |
| Breamore | No data | No data |
| Brockenhurst | 1222 | 1222 |
| Burley | 492 | 492 |
| Copythorne | 2009 | 2009 |
| Corhampton | 5 | |
| Damerham | No data | No data |
| Denny Lodge | 1698 | 1698 |
| Downton | 5 | |
| East Boldre | 195 | 195 |
| Edmonsham | 173 | |
| Ellingham | 828 | 828 |
| Exbury & Lepe | 102 | 102 |
| Fawley | 789 | 789 |
| Fordingbridge | 210 | 210 |
| Godshill | 829 | 829 |
| Hale | 134 | 134 |
| Hordle | 552 | 552 |
| Hurn | 116 | |
| Hyde | 594 | 594 |
| Hythe & Dibden | 65 | 65 |
| Landford | 120 | |
| Lockerly | 253 | |
| Lymington | 104 | 104 |
| Lyndhurst | 382 | 382 |
| Marchwood | 385 | 385 |
| Melchet Park | 165 | |
| Milford on Sea | No data | No data |
| Minstead | 1077 | 1077 |
| Netley Marsh | 199 | 199 |
| New Milton | 583 | 583 |
| Nursling | 9 | |
| Odstock | 14 | |
| Redlynch | 45 | |
| Ringwood | 546 | 546 |
| Rockbourne | No data | No data |
| Sopley | 445 | 445 |
| Southampton | 21 | |
| Sway | 283 | 283 |
| Totton | 242 | 242 |
| Upham | 2 | |
| Whiteparish | 132 | |
| Whitsbury | 21 | 21 |
| Winterslow | 3 | |
| Woodgreen | 98 | 98 |
| Total | 18747 | 17683 |

Table 9, on the next page, indicates that back-up land amounts to an estimated 71% of all improved grassland in the New Forest District Council area¹³. (Natural England's figures for the distribution of improved grassland in the New Forest is shown in Map 3, page 22). In some parishes the requirement is greater than the grassland area calculated by Natural England. This is most notably the case on the core parishes of Bramshaw, Burley, Denny Lodge, East Boldre, Godshill, Lyndhurst and Minstead (highlighted). The boundary parishes of Copythorne, Hyde and Marchwood also indicate high back-up land requirement. As noted in Section 3, evidence from the survey respondents indicates that, while 72% of Commoners have their main area of back-up land in the same parish as their holding, 50% of all back-up land area is located outside that parish. The estimated distribution of back-up land is graphically represented in Map 4 (page 22).

Without data regarding the actual distribution of all back-up land, it is not presently possible to calculate where, in the boundary parishes of the New Forest District Council area or further afield this land is located. However, in those parishes which span the National Park Authority boundary it is estimated that back-up land accounts for at least 55% of the area and, with the shortage of available land in the core parishes, it is likely to be much higher.

¹³ Natural England data published under the Open Government Licence
<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/>

**Table 9: Back-up acreage area and available grassland in New Forest District Council:
Verderers' Marking Fee and Natural England data**

| 2024 Marking Fee Register | | Natural England Improved Grassland | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------|
| Parish | Back-up acreage in NFDC area | Acres | % |
| Ashurst Colbury | 35 | 63 | 56% |
| Beaulieu | 962 | 1094 | 88% |
| Boldre | 806 | 993 | 81% |
| Bramshaw | 1773 | 861 | 206% |
| Bransgore | 24 | 449 | 5% |
| Breamore | No data | 974 | |
| Brockenhurst | 1222 | 814 | 150% |
| Burley | 492 | 369 | 133% |
| Copythorne | 2009 | 1237 | 162% |
| Damerham | No data | 1022 | |
| Denny Lodge | 1698 | 470 | 361% |
| East Boldre | 195 | 47 | 411% |
| Ellingham | 828 | 1680 | 49% |
| Exbury & Lepe | 102 | 254 | 40% |
| Fawley | 789 | 340 | 232% |
| Fordingbridge | 210 | 1670 | 13% |
| Godshill | 829 | 479 | 173% |
| Hale | 134 | 535 | 25% |
| Hordle | 552 | 595 | 93% |
| Hyde | 594 | 586 | 101% |
| Hythe & Dibden | 65 | 601 | 11% |
| Lymington | 104 | 576 | 18% |
| Lyndhurst | 382 | 229 | 167% |
| Marchwood | 385 | 270 | 143% |
| Milford on Sea | No data | 311 | |
| Minstead | 1077 | 638 | 169% |
| Netley Marsh | 199 | 1227 | 16% |
| New Milton | 583 | 746 | 78% |
| Ringwood | 546 | 1705 | 32% |
| Rockbourne | No data | 829 | |
| Sopley | 445 | 980 | 45% |
| Sway | 283 | 852 | 33% |
| Totton | 242 | 239 | 101% |
| Whitsbury | 21 | 1150 | 2% |
| Woodgreen | 98 | 130 | 75% |
| Total | 17684 | 25015 | 71% |

6. Results summary

The data used in this report comes from a number of sources brought together to produce detailed information about the need for private grazing land to support the New Forest's commoning economy. The primary sources are: a survey of practising Commoners which revealed information about respondents' experience of accessing and using back-up land and the Verderers' Marking Fee Register, which provided the numerical background for the whole commoning population. The secondary sources are: Natural England data on the distribution of grazing land (improved grassland) in the New Forest District Council area and the mapping expertise of the GeoData Unit at Southampton University which have made it possible to place back-up land into the wider context of New Forest economy and geography.

The research has been undertaken in the knowledge that there is no reliable measure of the extent of back-up land in the New Forest held by any organisation. Also, there is a limited understanding of how commoning operates as farming practice rather than the provision of grazing animals to an area of exceptional environmental importance in a densely populated part of England. However, since the results are based on the location of Commoners' holdings rather than the actual distribution of the back-up land each Commoner uses, they offer only a partial answer to the distribution of private land used to support Commoning in the New Forest.

Marking Fee Register

- The Verderers' Marking Fee Register records the accounts of approximately 700 Commoners who paid marking fees on their animals in 2024. It indicates that Commoners live in almost all the parishes of the New Forest District Council area and beyond.
- Information it contains shows that over 90% of Commoners turn out ponies, and that the number of ponies is spread evenly across the commoning population. However, only 13% turn out cattle and the majority of these animals are in larger herds with an average of 50 animals.

2024 survey of practising Commoners

- The survey revealed that respondents have access to almost 5000 acres (2023 hectares) of back-up land with an average of 35 acres (14 hectares) per Commoner to support their animals. This figure covers a wide range of different situations ranging from Commoners with a few ponies and a small paddock to those who turn out large numbers of animals and may grow forage crops on private land for their own use, or for sale.
- Almost three quarters of respondents said that their main area of back-up land is in the same parish as their house/holding. However, this only accounts for half the acreage of the land used, with the remainder located in a different parish.

- Forty-one percent of back-up land is owned by Commoners, while a further 41% is rented and 18% is accessed through informal agreements with its owner. Almost half of rental agreements are made for one year or less and only 18% are over five years.
- Three quarters of respondents said that they use their back-up land as winter grazing for their animals, with nearly two thirds of cattle owners and more than half of pony owners bringing all their animals in for the winter. However, all respondents said that they have multiple uses for their land, including summer grazing, livestock management and cutting hay and silage to support their commoning.
- Almost a quarter of respondents said that they have lost rented back-up land in the last five years, with the most common reason being that the land has been sold by its owner.
- Almost half of respondents said that they need more back-up land to continue or expand their commoning. The main reasons given for their inability to secure such land were given as there is no land available locally or that it is too expensive.

Combined datasets

- The survey data was used to model the extent and distribution of back-up land occupied by all the Commoners included in the 2024 Marking Fee Register. The modelling revealed that Commoners living within the New Forest District Council boundary need nearly 18,000 acres (over 7000 hectares) of back-up land to support their animals off the forest.
- When this area is compared to the improved grassland analysis of the same parishes published by Natural England, it is apparent that commoning requires nearly three quarters of the total area.
- The survey's reliance on the location of Commoners' holdings to identify the distribution of back-up land has meant that the whole population model attributes a disproportionate amount of such land to the core Forest parishes. This suggests that more than the total area of grassland in these parishes is occupied in support of commoning. Consequently, it is clear that Commoners living in the core parishes also occupy a considerable acreage of land in the boundary area, increasing the amount of land in boundary parishes used as back-up grazing.

7. Pressures on back-up land in the New Forest

The New Forest's two adopted local plans recognise the importance of commoning to the landscape and cultural heritage of the New Forest and the need to protect the land necessary to support commoning as a strategic objective. The National Park Authority Plan states that *'In the National Park the practice of commoning is particularly recognised as being integral to the maintenance of the essential landscape character and cultural heritage of the area... it is important that agricultural land, which is used for these purposes, is not developed or lost to other uses.'* (SP48). Strategic objective SO8 in the New Forest District Council Local Plan commits the authority to promoting *'a positive future for rural areas and to help secure their economic prosperity and social well-being by supporting farming and traditional commoning practices including back-up grazing.'*

Housing

The land within the National Park is protected from major development (except in exceptional circumstances) by provisions within the National Planning Policy Framework which 'reiterates the Government's support for National Parks, stating that they have "...the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty...". Furthermore, New Forest District Council also has a duty under Section 245 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 which states that relevant authorities must now 'seek to further' the statutory purposes of Protected Landscapes. This is an active duty and replaces the previous duty on relevant authorities to 'have regard to' their statutory purposes.

However, local housing need in the New Forest area (District and National Park) is significant. Both adopted plans include housing site allocations on greenfield sites adjacent to present towns and villages and much of the greenfield land around the National Park under New Forest District Council's planning control is potentially vulnerable to development. The adopted New Forest District Council plan states that:

'... just 19% of the undeveloped land in the Plan Area is not directly affected by a significantly constraining national policy, safety or environmental constraint. Of this approximately 4,500 hectares of greenfield land, around 950 hectares have locally identified habitat or wildlife value¹³, around 210 hectares are within the strategic land reserve for the Port of Southampton at Dibden Bay, and around 470 hectares are allocated for development in this Local Plan. The majority of the remaining area without significant constraints is in relatively remote rural locations in the Avon Valley and Downlands sub-area.'(p10)

Proposed changes to national planning rules have placed New Forest District Council under greatly increased pressure to allocate additional land for housing to meet local need. While the Council's adopted plan includes the provision of over 500 homes per year, the Government's latest housing need figures for New Forest District identify a need for over 1500 net new dwellings per annum.¹⁴

Competing environmental and green energy schemes

Beyond the pressures on available land resulting from the need for housing and commercial development, the ways in which owners can presently capitalise on undeveloped land have come from a number of different green energy and environmental enhancement opportunities.

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2>

In the drive to net-zero, schemes that reduce reliance on carbon intensive energy production are presently focussed on land intensive solar farms. Two planning applications for large solar developments on farmland were heard by local planning authorities in 2024: one within the National Park boundary was refused, the other – outside its boundary - was approved. It is to be expected that there will be further applications for solar farms, particularly on the land around the National Park.

A government initiative started in 2024 encourages landowners to apply for the England Woodland Creation Offer to ‘...help nature recovery, to sequester carbon from the atmosphere and to help reduce our reliance on other countries to supply the timber...’¹⁵ by planting trees. The scheme, which is aimed at lower grade agricultural land, informs those with suitable land of the considerable financial benefits available to those who create new woodlands, which is an additional threat to greenfield sites and offers landowners far greater returns than the rental of land for Commoners’ grazing.

Over recent years several hundred hectares of grazing land have been taken up for Biodiversity Net Gain, Nutrient Neutrality and other environmental schemes. As well as providing a secure income for owners of lower grade grazing land, management constraints on land engaged in these schemes may preclude commoning. Further research is needed to assess the impact of these schemes upon the availability of back-up land and their compatibility – in particular with Biodiversity Net Gain and Nutrient Neutrality set-off - with the uses of back-up land.

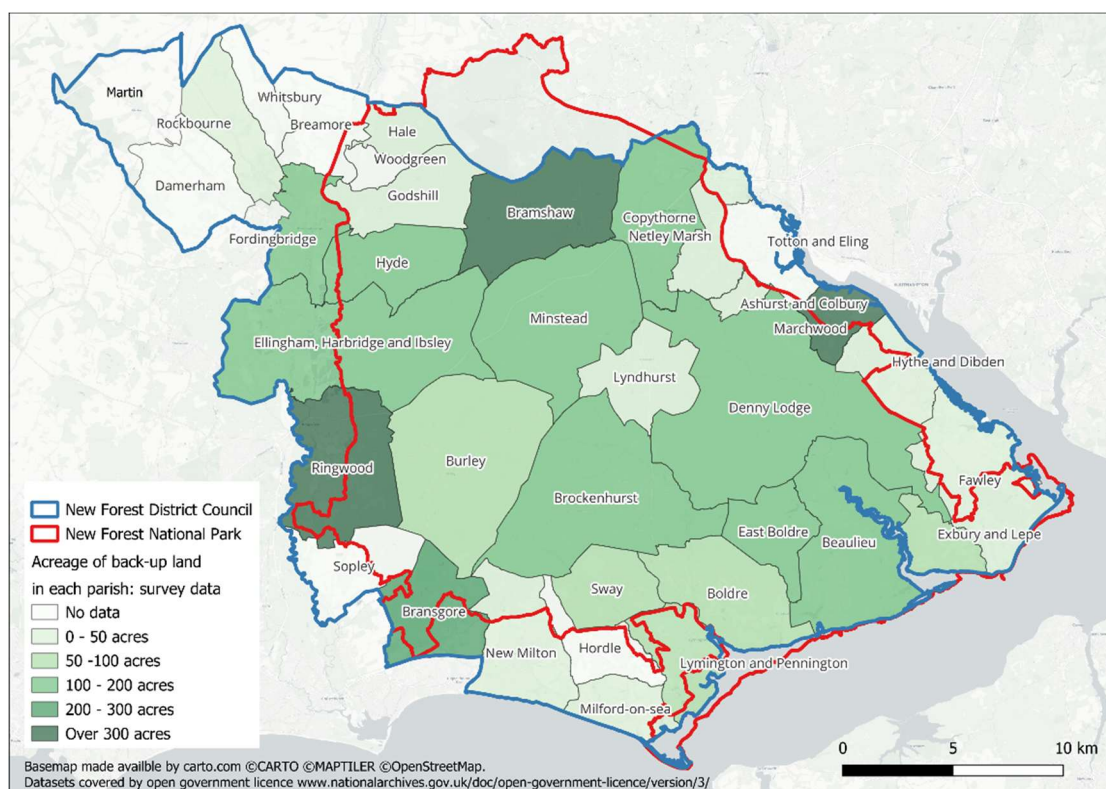
8. Conclusions

The results of the present survey demonstrate that New Forest Commoners require a considerable area of private grazing land to support their animals when they are taken off the Forest. While many Commoners have their homes or holdings in the core parishes of the New Forest, many also rely on back-up land in the surrounding parishes. Cattle commoning becomes increasingly difficult if the land where animals are kept over winter is isolated from the Forest. Without access to considerable areas of grazing land local to the open forest it is doubtful that many of these Commoners would be able to continue to depasture their livestock on the open forest resulting in the rapid decline in the area’s environmental and landscape value, as well its attractiveness to the many visitors who come to the New Forest.

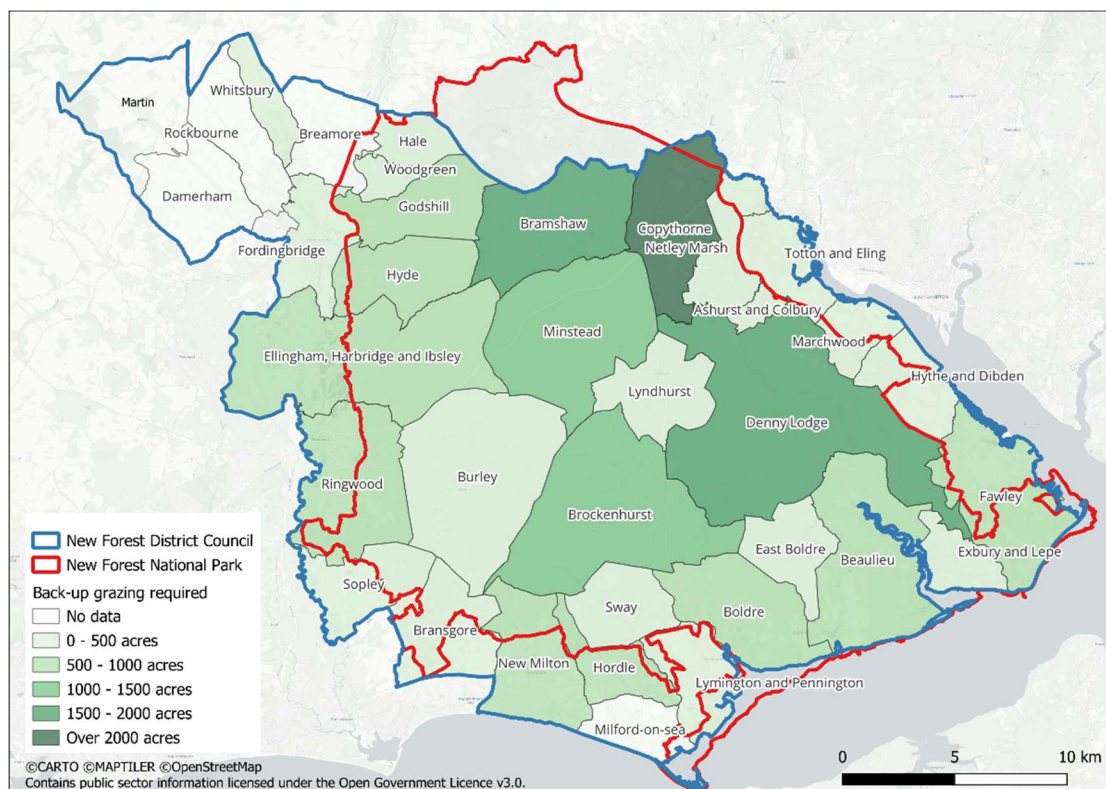
Given the pressures on grassland in the area around the National Park mentioned above, recent developments in government policy pose a considerable threat to the future of the limited area of available for back-up land in the parishes that come under New Forest District Council for planning control, and therefore to commoning in the New Forest and with it, the future of the Forest itself.

¹⁵ https://www.gov.uk/guidance/england-woodland-creation-offer?utm_source=online-resource&utm_medium=biodiversity-fact-sheet&utm_campaign=woods-for-nature&utm_content=national#how-to-apply-for-ewco-step-by-step

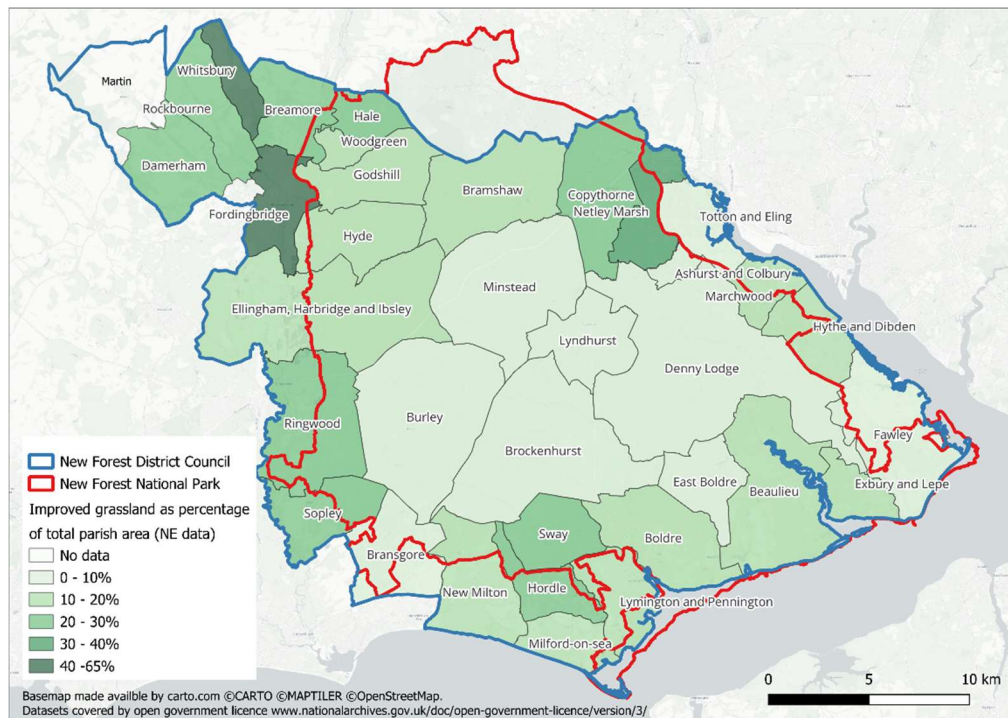
Map 1: Backup land in NFDC area identified by survey



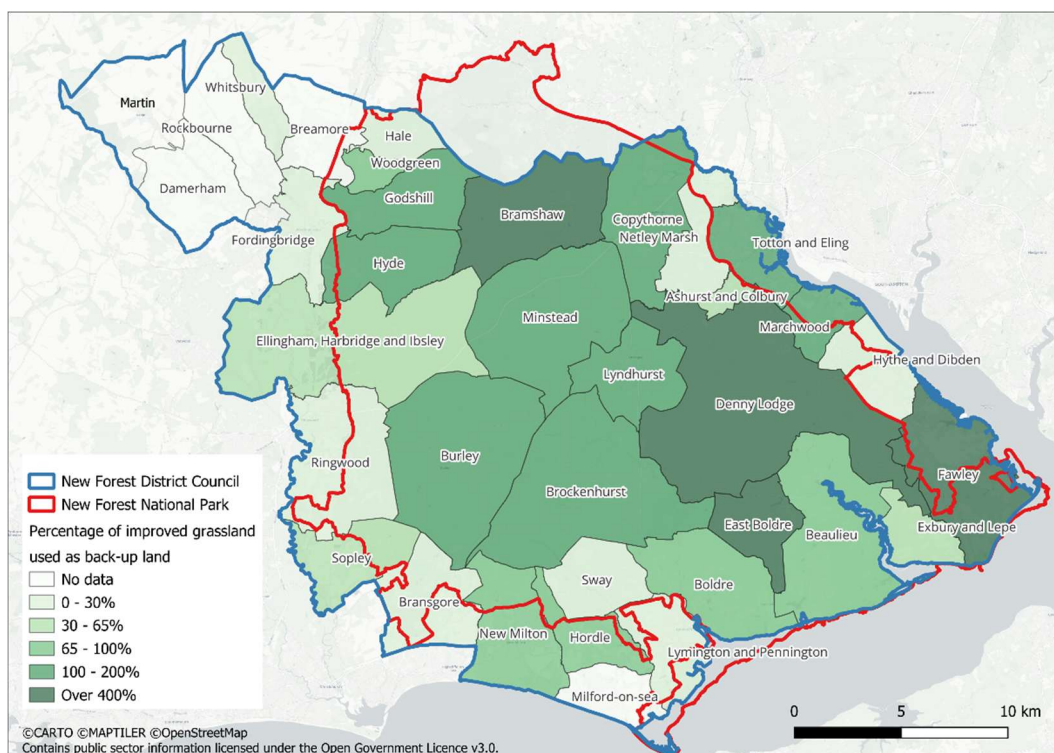
Map 2: Distribution of back-up land based on Commoners' holdings recorded in Verderers' Marking Fee Register



Map 3: Parishes in the New Forest showing distribution of improved grassland designated by Natural England¹⁶



Map 4: Percentage of available improved grassland used as back-up land based on parish in which Commoner's holding is situated



¹⁶ Natural England improved grassland accessed from Living England Habitat Map (Phase 4)
<https://www.data.gov.uk/dataset/e207e1b3-72e2-4b6a-8aec-0c7b8bb9998c/living-england-habitat-map-phase-4>

Appendix

Correlation between respondents to survey and Marking Fee Register

| | Respondents | Marking Fee Register |
|---------------------------------|-------------|----------------------|
| Ashurst and Colbury | 1 | 6 |
| Beaulieu | 8 | 40 |
| Boldre | 5 | 32 |
| Bramshaw | 8 | 51 |
| Bransgore | 0 | 3 |
| Brockenhurst | 7 | 51 |
| Burley | 10 | 31 |
| Copythorne | 8 | 51 |
| Denny Lodge | 5 | 34 |
| East Boldre | 4 | 22 |
| Ellingham, Harbridge and Ibsley | 9 | 46 |
| Exbury and Lepe | 2 | 5 |
| Fawley | 5 | 38 |
| Fordingbridge | 1 | 8 |
| Godshill | 0 | 17 |
| Hale | 4 | 9 |
| Hordle | 0 | 10 |
| Hyde | 10 | 27 |
| Hythe and Dibden | 1 | 12 |
| Lymington and Pennington | 6 | 13 |
| Lyndhurst | 4 | 24 |
| Marchwood | 0 | 13 |
| Milford-on-Sea | 0 | 0 |
| Minstead | 6 | 37 |
| Netley Marsh | 2 | 8 |
| New Milton | 6 | 12 |
| Ringwood | 8 | 9 |
| Sopley | 1 | 2 |
| Sway | 9 | 22 |
| Totton and Eling | 2 | 14 |
| Woodgreen | 0 | 6 |
| Grand Total | 134 | 653 |
| Correlation | 0.72 | |

There is a positive correlation of 0.72 between the number of respondents and the number of commoners turning out from each parish within the NFDC area.

Number of commoners with different numbers of animals

| Number of animals | Ponies | | | | | Number of animals | Cattle | | | |
|-------------------|-------------|------|----------------|------|--|-------------------|-------------|------|----------------|------|
| | MFR figures | | Survey figures | | | | MFR figures | | Survey figures | |
| 1 to 4 | 323 | 46% | 38 | 28% | | 1 to 4 | 36 | 5% | 7 | 5% |
| 5 to 10 | 174 | 25% | 43 | 32% | | 5 to 10 | 41 | 6% | 3 | 2% |
| 11 to 20 | 88 | 12% | 20 | 15% | | 11 to 20 | 26 | 4% | 12 | 9% |
| 21 to 30 | 20 | 3% | 8 | 6% | | 21 to 30 | 18 | 3% | 1 | 1% |
| 31 to 50 | 21 | 3% | 4 | 3% | | 31 to 50 | 38 | 5% | 2 | 1% |
| 51 to 100 | 14 | 2% | 3 | 2% | | 51 to 100 | 3 | 0% | 4 | 3% |
| Over 100 | 2 | 0% | 0 | 0% | | Over 100 | 1 | 0% | 1 | 1% |
| None | 64 | 9% | 18 | 13% | | None | 543 | 77% | 104 | 78% |
| Grand Total | 706 | 100% | 134 | 100% | | Grand Total | 706 | 100% | 134 | 100% |
| Correlation | 0.88 | | | | | Correlation | 0.99 | | | |

There is a positive correlation of 0.88 between the number of respondents and the number of commoners turning out ponies in 2024 and a positive correlation of 0.99 between the numbers turning out cattle.

Questionnaire

Backup land survey questionnaire

This questionnaire is completely anonymous and the responses will only be analysed by parish. This will enable us to demonstrate the importance of backup land in different parts of the Forest, but not to identify individual areas or holdings.

Please tell us about your commoning situation over the past year:

The location of your home/holding and your backup land

1. In which parish is your house/holding
 - a. List of parishes
2. In which parish is the main area of backup land that supports your commoning?
 - a. List of parishes
3. How many acres is this area of backup land
4. Do you own, rent or have informal access to this land?
5. If you rent the land, how long is your tenancy?
 - a. 1 year or less
 - b. 2 to 5 years
 - c. Over 5 years
 - d. Not sure

Up to three areas of land in different parishes can be entered

6. How do you use your backup land to support your commoning? (tick all that apply)
 - a. Winter grazing for my animals
 - b. For animals that are in need of extra care/attention
 - c. To graze saddlers needed to manage my depastured stock
 - d. To cut hay/silage
 - e. For other uses related to my commoning (please say what below)
7. Have you lost any backup land over the past 5 years?
 - a. Yes/No
8. What is the main reason that you have lost access to this land?
 - a. End of tenancy
 - b. Land sold by owner
 - c. Division of land due to inheritance
 - d. End of informal arrangement
 - e. Other reason (please say what below)

The animals you have turned out this year

It would be helpful if you could give us some idea about the number of animals you turned out this year.

The form is anonymous, so we won't be able to link any information back to you

9. Do you turn ponies or donkeys onto the Forest or Commons?
 - a. Yes/No
10. How many ponies/donkeys have you turned out this year?
11. Did you bring any ponies/donkeys into your holding or backup land last winter
 - a. Yes/No
12. How many did you bring in last winter?
13. Why did you bring them into your backup land?
 - a. All my ponies come in for the winter
 - b. Last year's foals
 - c. Because they were poor/ in need of care
 - d. To bring them on/prepare for sale
 - e. Some other reason (please say why below)

The questions are repeated for cattle and sheep

14. If you would like to say anything else about your access to backup land, please do so below

Thank you for completing the survey.

Respondents' comments

Comments made by respondents regarding the issues they have experienced with back-up land

Respondents most frequent point is that back-up land isn't available, either locally or anywhere in the Forest:

We have got rid of sheep and cattle due to lack of grazing.

Back up grazing is hard to come by, it's needs to be sufficient enough to support the number of stock owned.

Desperately short of affordable land in this area of the forest.

Hale has very little back up land.

Where land is available to rent is often set at a level for recreational horse keepers:

We have had to rent back up grazing outside of the forest/ further afield due to the lack of supply/ availability in the forest and the cost tends to be for riding horses i.e. per pony (per head) as opposed to renting just the land at a set price.

I currently pay livery rates on the land that I rent if I need to bring my ponies in.

I currently pay livery rates on the land that I rent if I need to bring my ponies in. This is extremely expensive and means I cannot increase my herd as it is not financially viable

In one parish - any ground that becomes available is done in a sealed bid system. I personally cannot afford to enter this there fire back up grazing is impossible

Available land may not be easily accessible for commoned stock or the conditions put on the agreement make it difficult to use for depastured stock:

Our current land is a common with public access. There is no handling/loading facility (pound, crush etc.) on the land and we are not allowed to build one; therefore we can only put on it animals that will load without a loading facility. Because of this we only put animals on it if they absolutely have to come off the Forest, and we have had to give away animals that we were asked to remove from the land. We desperately need something better.

Access to my back up grazing is via a track not owned by the owner of the back up grazing. Plans for access from the road have been rejected so transporting of forest ponies on a public footpath could be dangerous and therefore we were unable to bring the ponies in last year.

Available land often has non-existent stock fence or no water connected.

Suitable back up grazing is being lost to different environmental agreements that restrict numbers and supplementary feeding. Back up grazing is mostly required during the winter and this is becoming even harder to find.

Owners of the land that is available as back-up grazing may not understand how commoning operates or no longer wish to enter longer term agreements:

I am desperate for some back up grazing as the local rents are absurd and a lot of the landlords do not understand commoning. I am extremely lucky to have a little bit of land but it's not secure and is extremely expensive.

Although I have access to back up grazing it is all on short term agreement which are controlled by the conservation bodies and it is hard to invest, grow or maintain my commoning if you're unsure whether you will still have the same ground next year.

Concerned it may be taken back by estate at any time.

As a tenant farmer, local estates do not help locals like they used to

Backup ground can be anything from rough environmental grazing to fields but to be profitable the commoner needs to be able to produce their own forage and not have to rely on a volatile market, the estates enjoy us grazing the environmental grazing allowing them to claim large payments for no risk but it is the ability to rent crop-able fields that is most at risk to us.