

**DARTMOOR COMMONS AND HILL FARMING
WESTMINSTER HALL DEBATE
BRIEFING: APRIL 2023**

The Uplands Alliance is a network of people passionate about the uplands of England and committed to bringing together those from practice, policy encompassing land management, farming and environmental perspectives. Our Steering Group includes government, non-government, industry and academic organisations.¹

The [Uplands Alliance](#) describes five components of a healthy, sustainable Uplands environment. They summarise our collective approach to sustaining their future.

- 1. Thriving Upland businesses and communities**
- 2. Responsible, active custodians**
- 3. Public awareness and pride**
- 4. Investment in return for public benefit**
- 5. Collective action**

We are concerned that there is a high level of conflict regarding the Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) schemes on Dartmoor's Commons. This is reducing trust between parties and threatens the multiple outcomes these areas are valued for.

While recognising that these HLS agreements are in many cases not meeting their ecological indicators of success the Uplands Alliance urges all parties to look for a way forward that:

- **Recognises site specific solutions are required.** In particular site specific management to address the extensive areas of Molinia that are only palatable to livestock at particular times of the years resulting in animals being concentrated on increasingly smaller areas of the commons. Grazing prescriptions appropriate to northern English commons are unlikely to be directly transferable to Dartmoor.
- **Adopts an evidence led approach.** To date most individual commons have not been provided with a report on the current ecological position nor received Natural England's recommendation for detailed management to move towards favourable condition of the SSSIs.
- **Accepts that tone and timeliness of communication is critical for successful outcomes and so far has been a barrier to progress.** Given the current state of relations between parties a time frame allow de-escalation of tension is required during which detailed plans for each common can be drawn up collaboratively allowing enough time for enduring solutions.

¹ This is a general briefing from the Uplands Alliance Network to inform MPs in advance of the Westminster Hall Debate on 18th April 2023. It is not a policy statement from individual members of the Steering Group. Some organisations are also preparing their own briefings. Due to ongoing bilateral negotiations both Statutory Bodies and organisations that own common land in Dartmoor are explicitly not endorsing this briefing to avoid any conflicts of interest.

- **Acknowledges the hugely challenging current financial circumstances for Upland farm businesses and that ELM is a key part of their future.** The latest Defra figures estimates a 51% reduction in Farm Business Income for 2022/23 compared with the average for the previous three years. With BPS currently being phased out and the new ELM options not yet published these 300 plus micro businesses on whom the health of Dartmoor SSSIs is dependent are under huge stress.
- **Embraces the broad range of public goods delivered by Dartmoor's Commons and accepts these can and should be enhanced.** Biodiversity is a key public good with strong legal protection for SSSI features of interest. In addition there are other public goods on Dartmoor including archeology, recreation, carbon storage, clean water, landscape and local rare breeds. All have been shaped by centuries of land management by local communities.

To address these points, we suggest the following specific steps might provide a way forward:

1. Adopt a 1 plus 4 model so to allow the first year of the 'five year' extension to be used to negotiate changes in management that can then be implemented over the subsequent four years.
2. Agree ways of working between the parties and a time line for agreeing future management so either the HLS agreements continue for a further four years or moved across into a CS or ELM agreement noting the latter should be available from 2024.
3. Appoint independent facilitators for each common to advise and negotiate between Natural England, the commoners and the landowners.
4. Establish an independent inquiry to explore the circumstances surrounding the Dartmoor Situation, to consider the role of the Dartmoor Commoners Council and how to better address the tensions in interests so to enable delivery of positive on the ground public good outcomes.

Dartmoor Background

Commons are at the core of Dartmoor's land management comprising 37% of the National Park and the vast majority of commons are also designated for nature as SSSIs and SACs. The main Common Land Unit is the Forest of Dartmoor that extends to over 11,000 ha. Over 25,000ha are affected by the current HLS expiries.

These commons have in the main been under stewardship schemes of one form or another for the last twenty years plus. Many of the current HLS schemes have expired or are expiring in 2023.

Dartmoor Commons are owned by a number of individuals (common owners) with over 300 farmers having rights of common for grazing, cattle, sheep and ponies. With the phasing out of BPS the primary mechanism for supporting micro family farming businesses in the uplands at present are HLS schemes.

The Issue

Natural England has advised the RPA that most Dartmoor Commons HLS schemes should not be provided with 5 year extensions unless they make changes to their

grazing practices as they are not delivering on the ecological indicators of success set out in these agreements.

In many cases, the Agreement Holders (mostly commons associations) were formally notified of this by NE less than a month before the expiry of their agreements and in one case in the week of the expiry. Notification was via a mail merge circular letter to all expiring agreement holders. One common had a further letter in early March with details of very substantial stock reductions to be phased over the next five years. This resulted in other commons assuming they would require the same level of stock reduction so escalating tensions. The actual ask from Natural England is variable between commons; ranging from substantive and moderate reductions in grazing numbers while some commons will be asked to make only minor changes. Many commons await clarification from NE of the conditions for their HLS extension.

Upland Farms and Public Goods

Upland farms which manage over 70% of our uplands do not provide businesses a fair return on their labour and assets without government support. This is because they produce products for which there is no market e.g. stunning landscapes, clean drinking water, natural and cultural heritage and access. These are public benefits requiring public funding. Upland businesses can provide more public benefits with better structured and properly funded support mechanisms. The average farm business income for upland farms for 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22 was £33,023 and is predicted by Defra to fall by 51% to £16,343 in 2022/23.

Natural England's Role

Natural England has three roles in Dartmoor:

- 1. As technical advisor to the RPA who manage the HLS schemes for Defra. It is the role of Natural England to recommend to the RPA whether an existing HLS should be extended or not.*
- 2. As the statutory body responsible for delivering favourable condition of our SSSIs.*
- 3. Natural England's general purpose includes, "contributing in other ways to social and economic well-being through management of the natural environment."*

Rural Payment Agency

The RPA grants all Environmental and Countryside Stewardship Schemes on behalf of Defra. The final decision on issuing an agreement lies with RPA though as part of the process of finalising an agreement the RPA need to be assured that a SSSI consent is current on land designated as a SSSI.

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For further information please contact:

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