

## Post Brexit Farming: Keep Cumbria's commoners commoning.

Over the centuries commoners have grazed their livestock on Cumbria's commons and shaped the landscape loved by many. Today around 1,000 commoners continue this tradition. But commoning is hard, the rewards low and commoners are slowly declining in numbers. The Federation of Cumbria Commoners asks HM Government to commit to agricultural policies that support commoners continue grazing the commons and, by doing so, conserve and restore the environment, support farming communities and the cultural heritage of Cumbria's fells and dales. In particular, to consider:

- Keep the current level of funding for agriculture, BUT
- Shift funding away from area-based payments to targeted payments to deliver real agricultural and environmental benefits on commons and fell farms
- Develop locally-led agri-environment schemes with the greatest rewards going to commoners who deliver the highest environmental benefits
- Design procedurally fair, smarter and simpler payment systems

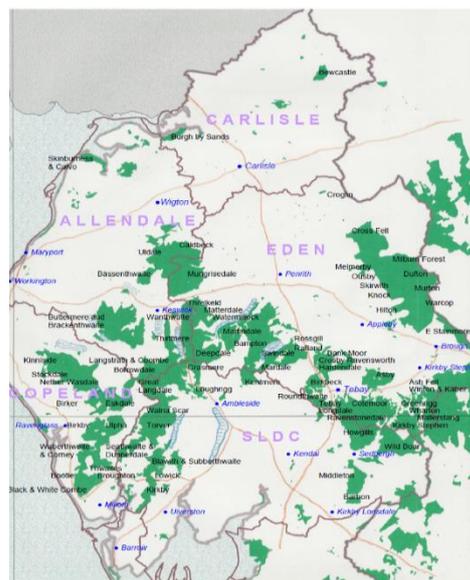
### What's so special about commons?

Common land is land owned by one or more persons over which another person(s) is entitled to exercise rights of common. Cumbria has one third of the common land in England – 112,900 ha in total. This land is mostly remote moorland. Commoners and shepherds have grazed hardy breeds of livestock on these commons for centuries shaping the mountain landscapes. This land is nationally important for wildlife habitats, water catchment and supply, tourism, access, carbon storage and archaeological conservation. No other category of farmed land delivers as many public benefits.

Today around 1,000 commoning families with a long proud history of farming use their rights of common to graze the Cumbrian fells and produce naturally-reared meat and excellent livestock. Like their forbears, they make the most of common land's rough unforgiving terrain by farming it in conjunction with adjacent lower lying land. This complex farming system, developed and adapted over the centuries, has created a rich farming cultural heritage of native sheep breeds, traditional shows and sports, shepherds meets and local dialects. These underpin the Lake District's new World Heritage Status.

But the vast majority of Cumbria's fell farms cannot survive in their present form without public payments. In 2015/2016 farm support payments accounted for over 40% of the average fell farm revenue. If commons are to remain special they need commoners to continue grazing their livestock on the common. To do this

commoners need a level of public support to keep going. They also need to be part of a vibrant and healthy farming industry that thrives into the future. The task of creating a post-Brexit English Agricultural Policy represents a great opportunity to develop fairer funding for farming and a working countryside which protects Britain's landscapes and diversity.



Common land in Cumbria

In this discussion paper we put forward a number of points that we believe must be integral to future support schemes to sustain commoning and fell farming not just in Cumbria, but in other areas of England where commoning is actively practiced.

# The Federation of Cumbria Commoners SIX “ASKs”

**R**ing-fence and maintain current levels of funding for the foreseeable future. In 2015, payments from the EU's CAP totalled around £3.3 billion. Put in context this is 0.44% of the UK's entire public spending budget of £748 billion. It took two World Wars to focus official minds on the value of having a level of national food security giving the UK population access to a sufficient, affordable and healthy diet. UK public investment in farming provides a food security buffer by protecting farm production. It builds resilience into our domestic food system and guides farmers towards enhancing the natural environment.



**S**hift funding away from area based payments. Under the current CAP five sixths of the public funding to farming goes to area-based direct payments rewarding land ownership rather than active farming. This system has been heavily criticised for allowing wealthy individuals, companies and charities reap millions of pounds of public funds, while medium and smaller farmers receive significantly less. This payment ratio should be reversed via a managed shift to targeted payments focused on encouraging innovation, quality food production, enhanced public goods, climate amelioration and other specific goals wanted by the nation.

Remaining area-based payments should be capped to a level to provide a minimum buffer to protect farm production as the UK exits the EU. These payment should be conditional on delivering a standard of good farming practice agreed between the farming industry and government.

**R**eform the way public funding is delivered. Commoners have a legitimate expectation to a payment system that is procedurally fair. The present system is overly complex and designed for single occupancy enclosed land. This leaves commoners unfairly disadvantaged. Many receive incorrect payments months later than other farmers causing financial hardship in some cases.

**R**etain livestock production in the hills through targeted payments to the uplands, young farmers and new entrants. Hill farming has many benefits including supporting the rest of the industry “down the hill”. Current farm support payments make a major contribution to upland economies via the “multiplier effect” created by fell farmers paying for a wide range of goods and services from local businesses. Without these payment rural economies will be poorer and residents may face significant hardship. They also help underpin the social fabric of rural communities by enabling farming families to stay on their farms. Payments could be made on the basis of workers per holding rather than on the amount of land, which would maintain more stable employment for upland economies.

Young farmers are crucial to Britain's farming future and to the continued agricultural management of common land. There is a need for a bespoke new-entrants and young farmers' scheme to include top up payments and capital grants to address barriers including access to land, capital, markets and education. Support for succession planning and facilitation to enable older farmers to retire and the



next generation to come through is also needed.

**D**evelop locally-led agri-environment schemes for common land that retain traditional pastoral commoning and maintain and increase delivery of public goods. We believe that new schemes should be built on the learning from previous UK agri-environment schemes and good practice from elsewhere – always remembering that commons are different. They cover large geographical areas and are collectively managed using traditional systems of hefted and acclimatised livestock. These factors make the design, administration, governance and delivery of schemes on common land significantly more complex than an individual farm scheme.



We want to see new schemes that are results based. Simply put, this is a smarter, more effective and fairer way to pay for the delivery of public goods from common land. Commoners who deliver the highest environmental benefits receive the greatest financial reward. In this way conservation activities can become as much a product for the commoner as the livestock they produce.

Larger schemes, in particular, may require trained advisors/facilitators to ensure the active engagement of commoners' associations and individual commoners in the design of local and practical schemes which address the real conservation needs of the common and yield real agricultural and environmental benefits.

Commoners and their associations negotiate to deliver habitat restoration and conservation grazing activities that best fit their fell farm business, skills, experiences and resources. The sum of the co-ordinated and collective output of all those involved is greater than its parts and creates bigger and better, more connected areas for wildlife and importantly, keep commoners commoning.



To cover the set-up costs, schemes need to run for a minimum of 10 years with an agreement drawn up between all. No one party/ individual should be able to unreasonably veto a scheme. The governance, administration and delivery of these commons schemes needs to be straightforward so that commoners are capable of self-managing their own schemes. Ongoing payments should be built into the overall scheme budget to cover the costs of delivering the scheme.

**D**evelop locally-led grassland agri-environment schemes on enclosed land to help fell farmers continue farming in an appropriate way to sustain Cumbria's working countryside. These schemes should be based on the same principles as outlined above where farmers nominate a number of active conservation jobs that suit the needs of their farm and are paid for the work they undertake on their enclosed land. Examples of jobs could include: bracken and scrub control; shelter belts; agro-forestry; hedge establishment, restoration and maintenance; maintaining/restoring dry stone wall; natural flood management; hay meadow restoration; linking habitat and wildlife corridors and preserving farming traditions.



**Other payments.** There are many other elements to an English replacement of the CAP and here we highlight a few that can have a direct effect on the viability of commoning and fell farming. They include:

- Support for the maintenance of farming cultural heritage and rural skills
- Develop innovative education, research and agricultural/environment extension services for fell farming and commoning : invest in farmer-led research and innovation; support farmer-led extension services (farmer networks); provide increased funding for public agriculture and food research
- Enable decentralisation of processing and marketing with local abattoirs and humane slaughter facilities reintroduced around the country.

- Prioritise sourcing of local food and products in county, district and National Park authority procurement contracts
- Likewise for tourism businesses (cafes and shops) of the National Trust and other local/ national NGOs
- Develop ways to increase the public's knowledge and understanding of commoning and fell farming

Finally, we recognise we have not provided a complete description of an English Agricultural Policy and that other important elements, such as, tariff and non-tariff trade issues and gaining a 'level playing field' need to be addressed at a national level. Getting the right trade deals for UK sheep meat are crucial to the future viability of commoning and fell farming.



The Federation of Cumbria Commoners was set up in 2003 to be a representative voice to support and protect the commoners of Cumbria. We are a membership organisation and are open to all local commoners' associations and commoners in Cumbria with affiliate members in Lancashire and Northumberland. Our overall aim is to maintain and improve the viability of fell farms with common land. We currently have around 500 members.

This paper was written by our administrator Viv Lewis in consultation with our committee made up of commoners/fell farmers.

For more information about the Federation see: [www.cumbriacommoners.org.uk](http://www.cumbriacommoners.org.uk)  
[viv@cumbriacommoners.org.uk](mailto:viv@cumbriacommoners.org.uk)