

## Open access

The public has legal open access to about 47,400 hectares of Dartmoor. Of this total, public access on foot (and horseback) to the Dartmoor commons, was secured under the *Dartmoor Commons Act 1985*. 5,200 hectares is access on foot made by agreement between the National Park Authority and a number of landowners/occupiers. New walking rights on Dartmoor specifically arising from the *Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000* (CRoW Act), as from 28 August 2005, extend to approximately 7,000 hectares.

On Dartmoor, this symbol is currently being used to inform you that you are entering CRoW Act access land.



In areas where there is open access, generally you do not have to stay on footpaths, bridleways or other rights of way. The vast areas of open country on north and south Dartmoor are mainly common land. There are also smaller areas of common land throughout the National Park, especially on the eastern side. Generally, access to common land is unrestricted in terms of when you can visit. The exceptions to this are the MoD's Range Danger Areas on north Dartmoor - firing times must be checked when planning to walk in these areas.

There are other areas in the National Park where the public has permitted open access, for example Forestry Commission woodlands and some National Trust land. Local on the ground information is usually provided to help people identify and explore such areas.

## Summary of Dartmoor Commons Byelaws

These Byelaws apply to the Dartmoor Commons and other access land within the National Park.

In summary they make it an offence to :-

- (i) drive, park or repair vehicles or trailers on the commons, or ride bicycles on the commons where there is no right of way for them
- (ii) camp within 100 metres of any road or in other prohibited places
- (iii) obstruct leats or watercourses
- (iv) light fires
- (v) allow dogs to run uncontrolled
- (vi) feed animals grazing on the commons
- (vii) train or school horses so as to cause damage
- (viii) disturb wildlife
- (ix) discharge firearms
- (x) throw or hit missiles (including golf balls) so as to cause annoyance to others
- (xi) damage fences, walls or property or remove soil, peat, dung or stones
- (xii) use metal detectors
- (xiii) engage in commercial activities except with the agreement of the Dartmoor National Park Authority and the landowner
- (xiv) fly model aircraft or kites so as to cause annoyance to others
- (xv) hold concerts or exhibitions without permission of the Dartmoor National Park Authority and the landowner
- (xvi) play musical instruments or radios so as to cause annoyance to others.

The Byelaws are enforced by National Park Rangers, with penalties of up to £100 per conviction.

This is only a summary of the Dartmoor Commons Byelaws. Copies of the Byelaws are available from Dartmoor National Park Information Centres or Headquarters; or view them on-line at [www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk](http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk) go to A-Z and click on Byelaws.

## Dartmoor Commoners' Council Regulations

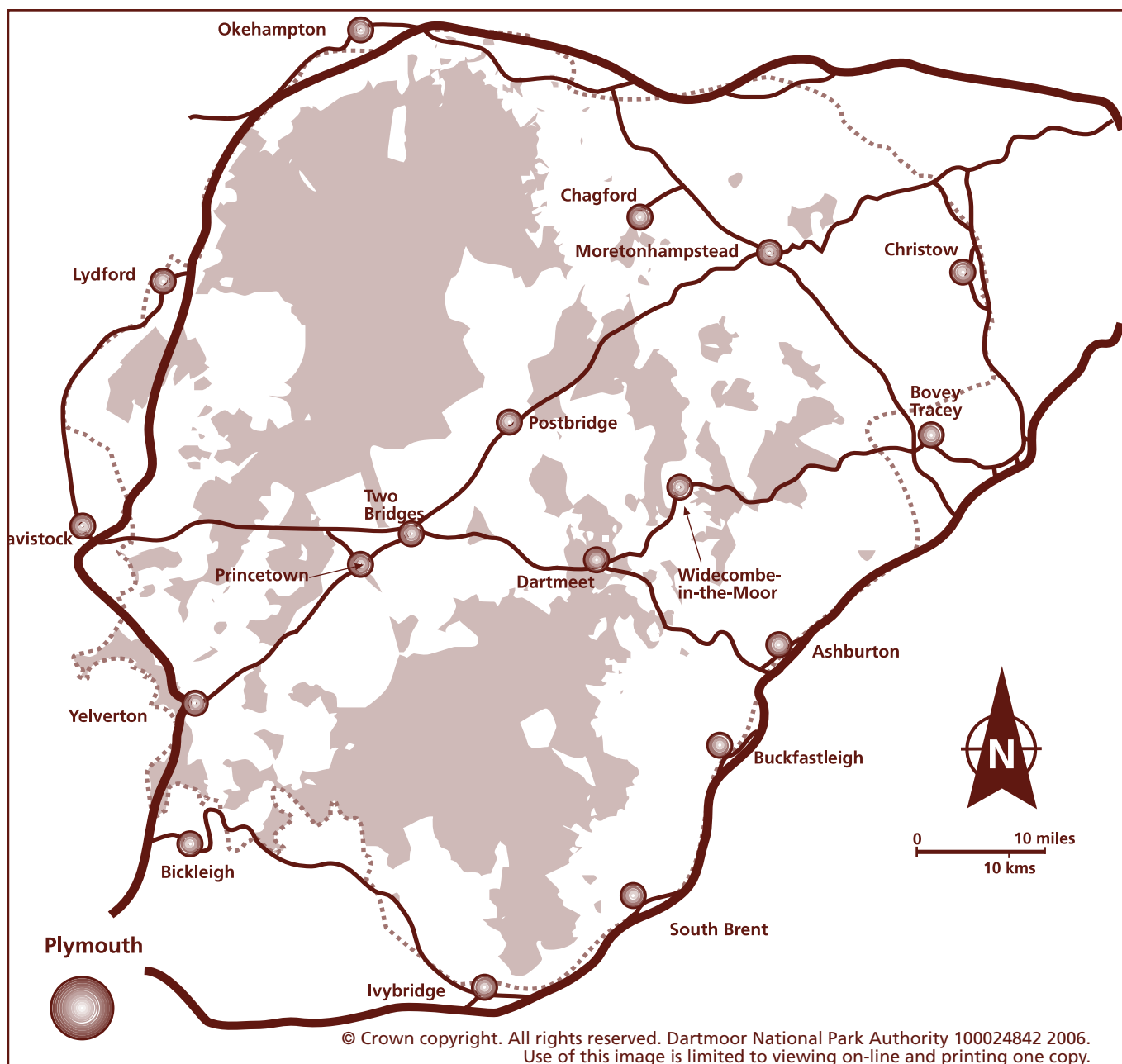
The Dartmoor Commoners' Council drew up Regulations governing the commoners' activities. After widespread consultation these Regulations were passed in September 1990.

In summary they ensure that:

- (i) animals are properly hefted or leared (getting cattle and sheep accustomed to a specific area) in accordance with the custom and practice of Dartmoor;
- (ii) animals are permanently marked for the identification of ownership;
- (iii) diseased or unthrifty stock (weak or old animals) are not kept on the commons;
- (iv) stock are not kept on the commons during prohibited periods, for example when it is necessary to control outbreaks of disease;
- (v) there are no bulls over the age of six months on the commons;
- (vi) there are no shod horses or ponies on the commons;
- (vii) there are no rams on the commons from the end of July until 10 November;
- (viii) dead livestock are removed promptly;
- (ix) motorised vehicles are not driven onto the commons except in the course of proper management or stock care;
- (x) heather, grass and gorse can only be burned (swaled) in the correct way.



# Common Land on Dartmoor



## Key

|       |                                    |   |      |   |         |
|-------|------------------------------------|---|------|---|---------|
| ..... | Boundary of Dartmoor National Park | — | Road | ■ | Commons |
|-------|------------------------------------|---|------|---|---------|

Further information available from our web site  
[www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk](http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk)  
 Visit the A-Z to access resources listed.

### Other related factsheets:

- Ponies
- Public Rights of Way

### Other publications:

- *Dartmoor Commons Act, 1985*
- *Dartmoor Commons Byelaws*
- *Dartmoor Commoners' Council Regulations*
- *Walking on Dartmoor*

For further information, and a list of other Fact Sheets available, contact the:

**Education Service,  
 Dartmoor National Park Authority,  
 Parke, Bovey Tracey, Newton Abbot,  
 Devon TQ13 9JQ**

**Tel: (01626) 832093**

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**Web site: [www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk](http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk)**

**Visit Learning About for more educational resources.**

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## East Dartmoor SSSI

### Condition of Features

| Feature name   | Condition date | Condition status          | Comment   |
|--|----------------|---------------------------|---|
| Assemblages of breeding birds - Submontane grasslands and heaths | 13/11/2012     | Unfavourable - Declining  | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Atlantic salmon, <i>Salmo salar</i>                              | 26/06/2023     | Not Recorded              | Admin assessment  |
| Blanket bog and valley bog (upland)                              | 16/08/2012     | Unfavourable - Recovering | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| EO - South-West England Igneous                                  | 10/11/2021     | Favourable                | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Otter, <i>Lutra lutra</i>  | 26/06/2023     | Not Recorded              | Admin assessment  |
| Short sedge acidic fen (upland)                                  | 28/06/2012     | Unfavourable - Recovering | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Soakaway and sump (upland)                                       | 06/09/2012     | Favourable                | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Subalpine dwarf-shrub heath                                      | 13/11/2012     | Unfavourable - Declining  | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Transition mire, ladder fen and quaking bog (upland)             | 28/06/2012     | Unfavourable - Recovering | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |

### Condition of Units

| Habitat name               | Responsible officer                                  | Feature name | Unit Id | Area (ha) | NNR overlapping area (ha) | Assessment date | Assessment description    | Comment   | Adverse condition reasons |
|----------------------------|--|--------------|---------|-----------|---------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 001          | 1003989 | 256.5137  | 0.00                      | 09/05/2012      | Unfavourable - Recovering | Unfavourable because of lack of dwarf shrub regeneration. Whilst dwarf shrub heath cover as a whole just about meets the threshold and winter browsing levels appear acceptable, there is significant evidence of die-back and heather beetle damage in the building, mature and senescent phases. The proportion of pioneer heather is also very low (<2% cover) & <i>Molinia</i> cover is quite high throughout (average c.20%). Historically levels of grazing were very high, especially in winter months. ESA agreement in 2001 cut those levels but either this cut was insufficient, straying kept levels high or the cut was a paper exercise. No real recovery apparent after the ESA. Further reductions made under a HLS agreement in 2012 |                           |

|  |  |     |         |          |      |            |                              |   |
|--|--|-----|---------|----------|------|------------|------------------------------|---|
| FEN,<br>MARSH<br>AND<br>SWAMP<br>-<br>Upland | Devon,<br>Cornwall &<br>Isles of Scilly<br>Area Delivery<br>Team | 002 | 1021334 | 42.4157  | 0.00 | 11/09/2012 | Unfavourable<br>- Recovering | Cover of positive indicator species exceeded the 50% target for this unit. Although a diverse range of mire species were recorded, frequencies were generally low, except for sphagnum species and deer grass. This unit failed the assessment based on covers of dwarf shrub recorded at less than 25%. Soft rush was present at a number of samples on the southern section of the unit. Cattle grazing was present on the wider moorland block at the time of the survey, the southern section of the unit appeared subject to low grazing pressure, the northern section was adequately grazed. |
| DWARF<br>SHRUB<br>HEATH -<br>Upland          | Devon,<br>Cornwall &<br>Isles of Scilly<br>Area Delivery<br>Team | 003 | 1003991 | 45.7285  | 0.00 | 24/01/2013 | Unfavourable<br>- Recovering | A HLS agreement on the Forest of Dartmoor started on 1st March 2012. This agreement is designed to improve the condition of this and other units.   |
| FEN,<br>MARSH<br>AND<br>SWAMP<br>-<br>Upland | Devon,<br>Cornwall &<br>Isles of Scilly<br>Area Delivery<br>Team | 005 | 1021335 | 31.2729  | 0.00 | 06/07/2011 | Favourable                   | 20 quadrats taken. 28.75% browsing of heather (Pass), good range of indicator species averaging 4 per stop (Pass). High cover of +ve indicator species (58% - Pass), Sphagnum cover averaged 39% cover over the quadrats it occurred in (18/20). Comparison with previous condition assessment suggests that in this assessment less sample points were taken from the more species poor fringes of the mire unit.  |
| DWARF<br>SHRUB<br>HEATH -<br>Upland          | Devon,<br>Cornwall &<br>Isles of Scilly<br>Area Delivery<br>Team | 007 | 1003995 | 132.7136 | 0.00 | 29/11/2010 | Favourable                   |   |
| DWARF<br>SHRUB<br>HEATH -<br>Upland          | Devon,<br>Cornwall &<br>Isles of Scilly<br>Area Delivery<br>Team | 008 | 1003996 | 199.4961 | 0.00 | 28/11/2013 | Unfavourable<br>- Declining  |   |
| DWARF<br>SHRUB<br>HEATH -<br>Upland          | Devon,<br>Cornwall &<br>Isles of Scilly<br>Area Delivery<br>Team | 009 | 1003997 | 74.3794  | 0.00 | 28/11/2013 | Unfavourable<br>- Declining  |   |
| DWARF<br>SHRUB<br>HEATH -<br>Upland          | Devon,<br>Cornwall &<br>Isles of Scilly<br>Area Delivery<br>Team | 010 | 1003998 | 55.1682  | 0.00 | 11/09/2012 | Favourable                   | The unit was assessed as being in favourable condition overall. Cover of indicator species exceeded 50%, and this comprised more than 2 indicator species, although the site was dominated by western gorse. The criterion for bare ground cover of less than 5% was met, although 5% cover was recorded at one sample. A range of heather age classes were recorded, but the site was dominated by even-aged dwarf shrub stands. Over-burning was noted in the 2009 survey, in 2012, a small burn was present in the south-east corner of the site.  |
| FEN,<br>MARSH<br>AND<br>SWAMP<br>-<br>Upland | Devon,<br>Cornwall &<br>Isles of Scilly<br>Area Delivery<br>Team | 011 | 1021337 | 10.8585  | 0.00 | 02/06/2011 | Favourable                   | Mire areas in good condition (drought excepting), with little disturbance and good cover of positive indicator species. The mire area is not wholly M29 soakaway, as mapped, but is a nice linear mire system with a wide variety of NVC types exhibited. The exceptionally dry weather has resulted in large areas of Sphagnum drying out, but this will recover with rain. Snipe, Whinchat and Reed Bunting breeding (or apparently so) within the unit.  |

|                               |  |     |         |          |      |            |            |   |
|-------------------------------|--|-----|---------|----------|------|------------|------------|---|
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland    | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 012 | 1019318 | 241.1769 | 0.00 | 02/06/2011 | Favourable | Overall a good stand of subalpine dwarf shrub heath. Dwarf shrub cover averages 62%. Heathers present in all growth phases, though with a preponderance of mature heather. Browsing pressure insufficient to inhibit growth (c.19% of shoots had been browsed in past winter). Bracken & Soft Rush cover <1% overall. Several conifers noted, but most have been killed; <0.1% cover. 2 or more indicator species noted at each stop. Geological interest at Birch Tor passes all objectives set. Whilst heather beetle damage is present, it is not killing whole stands, so appears to be at a reasonable level. Bare ground cover <1%, but no disturbed bare ground noted. |
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland    | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 013 | 1021336 | 116.8202 | 0.00 | 02/06/2011 | Favourable | Good quality dry heath, with a good age structure (though balanced towards the building & mature phases of growth). Burns in the past few years have been well-sited, and have resulted in some good regrowth of pioneer heathers and bilberry. Browsing pressure is low and stock levels seem appropriate: about 20 ponies and 40 sheep seen across this and the adjacent units  |
| FEN, MARSH AND SWAMP - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 014 | 1021338 | 5.1598   | 0.00 | 02/06/2011 | Favourable | Mire walked from head to foot as a transect (where safe to do so). As with U11, is in reality a range of NVC types closely intermingled, but in generally good condition. Good cover of positive indicators present. Only stock noted were sheep (c.20 animals here and on the adjacent unit). Disturbance levels low, especially considering the exceptionally dry conditions.   |
| FEN, MARSH AND SWAMP - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 015 | 1021339 | 11.7453  | 0.00 | 11/09/2012 | Favourable | Overall, the mire was in good condition. The target of 50% cover of positive indicator species was exceeded, and good species diversity was recorded in the survey. Mean graminoid cover was 31%, and cattle grazing was observed on the unit at the time of the survey. Grazing pressure on previous season's dwarf shrub shoots appeared to be low. A total of 10% bare ground was recorded at 2 samples, although frequency of bare ground across the unit as a whole was low-moderate at 5/20 samples.  |
| FEN, MARSH AND SWAMP - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 016 | 1021340 | 9.7826   | 0.00 | 06/09/2012 | Favourable | The unit had an average cover of 85% positive indicator species, with a good diversity of species per quadrant including sphagnum, Marsh St John's Wort and bogbean. 3 ponies were observed grazing the mire, however, there was no evidence of the sphagnum being crushed or pulled up. Overall graminoid cover was below 30% and bare ground was infrequent - less than 1% of the ground was disturbed. There were no scattered native trees or scrub, bracken or non-native species and no evidence of burning. Average sward height 14cm. The grazing pressure is low and mire is in very good condition.   |

|                            |  |     |         |          |      |            |                           |   |
|----------------------------|--|-----|---------|----------|------|------------|---------------------------|---|
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 017 | 1025063 | 118.9540 | 0.00 | 24/05/2007 | Favourable                | 25 random points were created within the unit boundary and measurements were taken following Common Standards methods for subalpine dry dwarf shrub heath. 21 points supported dry heath, 1 wet heath, 2 rough acid grassland and 1 bracken. 0.2% average bare ground cover was recorded in dry heath stands and 7 had native tree cover (average 0.1% for all dry heath stands). Average bracken litter in dry heath stands was 0.3%. Only 4 quadrats (19%) failed the threshold 50% cover of indicator species and the average for all 21 quadrats was 68.6%. No quadrats failed the target for indicator species (at least two species to be present) and the average was 3.1 species per quadrat. 8 quadrats supported mature or degenerate ling (38%), 12 building or building/mature phase (57%), 1 pioneer (5%). No burning has taken place on this unit since at least 2002. Across the whole SSSI, about 70ha of heath has been burnt since 2002, about 3.8% of the heath available to burn. 81% of quadrats passed the thresholds for the percentage of ling shoots browsed off, so grazing pressure is low across the unit. Heather beetle damage to ling was noted throughout the unit. Overall, 14 (67%) quadrats passed all targets. Given the high average cover of dwarf shrubs and low grazing pressure, this unit remains in favourable condition.  |
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 018 | 1025061 | 113.1292 | 0.00 | 25/08/2011 | Unfavourable - Recovering | Structured walk through the unit, taking 20 samples within the area of dry heath as previously mapped. North of the main road the steep slopes are bracken-dominated with fragments of heath amongst acid grassland. South contains extensive heath. Bryophytes constant (mainly Hypnum jut., Rhytid. squar., Hyloc. spl.). Bare ground infrequent and confined to tracks and past swales. Two or more dwarf shrub spp found in 18/20 samples (2 fail), and a mean of 2.75 spp/sample. Dwarf shrub cover was 51% (mean) through the samples. Gorse cover c.1% through samples. No invasive weedy species noted in samples or across the feature as a whole. Juncus effusus not recorded in samples, and cover <0.1% of feature. All heather age classes present, though majority is mature (pass). Browsing difficult to assess, but appears to have been reasonable, with c.50% of pioneer growth and c.33% of non-pioneer growth browsed (marginal fail). Small areas (individual plants) show evidence of heather-beetle damage, but not widespread. Trees and scrub almost absent from the feature - 2 Rowan seedlings found. No non-native vegetation noted. Burning has all been in non-sensitive areas, but a large burn from several years ago is regenerating as an Agrostis curtisii grassland with occasional patches of Vaccinium. Bracken cover within the unit is c.15%, though appears below the 10% threshold within the dwarf shrub heath. |
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 019 | 1025062 | 111.5167 | 0.00 | 02/06/2011 | Favourable                | Well structured subalpine dwarf shrub heath. Dwarf shrub cover in excess of 60% overall. Tree/scrub cover <0.1% overall (one or two Rowan seedlings are now at the same height as the heather canopy). One or two dead conifers are present. Soft Rush cover <0.1% of the feature. Pleurocarpus mosses are abundant under the heather canopy, but there are very few non-crustose lichens present. 2 or more dwarf shrub species present throughout and browsing pressure insufficient to damage heather. Some heather beetle damage, but not significant at present. A lot of the bilberry has been eaten by a moth (?) larva, which has skeletonised new shoots and sewn up the shoot tips to protect a pupa.   |

|                               |  |     |         |          |      |            |                           |   |
|-------------------------------|--|-----|---------|----------|------|------------|---------------------------|---|
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland    | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 020 | 1025057 | 346.7819 | 0.00 | 06/07/2011 | Unfavourable - Recovering | 20 quadrats taken across feature. 39.85% average dwarf-shrub cover (Fail), Passes on i) no negative indicator species, ii) no scrub iii) no non-native species. Fails on lack of all heather age classes being present. Only 1/20 had 3 age classes present in vicinity of quadrat and no degenerate heather noted on any stops. Heather averaged 24% cover in the quadrats it occurred in. Unit passed on browsing pressure - 48% on pioneer and 32% on non-pioneer. Comparison with previous condition assessment suggests that, on balance, the unit is continuing to recover, with an increase in overall dwarf-shrub cover detected.   |
| FEN, MARSH AND SWAMP - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 021 | 1025059 | 8.7546   | 0.00 | 11/09/2012 | Unfavourable - Recovering | Species diversity was shown to be good on this unit at the time of survey; however, cover of positive indicator species did not meet the target of 50%. Peripheral samples were graminoid dominated (particularly Molinia), and there was no evidence of recent grazing on the unit. Cover and frequency of dwarf shrubs were also recorded as being insufficient to meet the targets of at least 2 species frequent, and a minimum of 25% cover. Willow was present within the unit and further encroachment may lead to a decline in condition of the mire.   |
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland    | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 022 | 1025058 | 90.2010  | 0.00 | 09/05/2012 | Unfavourable - Recovering | Predominantly H4 heathland occasionally grading into H12a and a 'damper? community with significant Molinia and M15 affinities along the stream valley. Unit fails on: overall cover of dwarf shrub (49% but much of it dying) and cover group 1 species (22%), minimal pioneer heather, poor diversity of heather age class and significant die-back throughout; mainly heather beetle. Heathland degraded and fragmented to SW end; in some areas U.gallii and grasses dominate with little heather. Where heather does occur, it appears heavily sheep browsed (suppressed at pioneer stage). Small groups of ewes and lambs present at this end of the site ? elsewhere in the unit just occasional individual sheep seen and a few ponies and grazing pressure appears light. High cover of U. Europeaus to eastern corner (2ha.) but partially on acid grassland. Historically levels of grazing were very high, especially in winter months. but partially on acid grassland. ESA agreement in 2001 cut those levels but either this cut was insufficient, straying kept levels high or the cut was a paper exercise. No real recovery apparent after the ESA. Further reductions made under a HLS agreement in 2012 |
| FEN, MARSH AND SWAMP - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 023 | 1025060 | 10.2844  | 0.00 | 11/09/2012 | Favourable                | The frequency and cover of positive indicator species was low. Targets for 33% cover of sphagnum species and 25-75% cover of dwarf shrub species were not met. Cover of graminoids (especially Molinia) and soft rush were high, but met the target of <75% cover. Poaching recorded in the 2009 survey was not present in 2012. Cattle grazing was present at time of survey, and current management should allow further restoration of the habitat.  |
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland    | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 024 | 1024995 | 78.5027  | 0.00 | 09/05/2012 | Unfavourable - Recovering | Ulex gallii dominated H4 with locally frequent, fragmented Calluna heath with Molinia and Agrostis curtisii. The U.gallii is even age, mainly senescing, with some mature Vaccinium, luxurious mosses but few ericoids. Fails on cover of Group 1 indicators (23%) and number of Group 1 species present, diversity of age structure and scarcity of pioneer growth. 12 ponies are grazing the unit and the grazing pressure does not appear heavy, but the more open, accessible areas contain the building and pioneer Calluna and the ease of access makes those areas attractive to the stock.  |

# Dendles Wood SSSI

## Condition of Features

| Feature name   | Condition date | Condition status | Comment   |
|--|----------------|------------------|---|
| Assemblages of breeding birds - Mixed: Scrub, Woodland | 26/05/2011     | Favourable       | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Bryophyte assemblage                                   | 01/01/1900     | Not Recorded     | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Lichen assemblage                                      | 01/01/1900     | Not Recorded     | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Lowland beech and yew woodland                         | 26/05/2011     | Favourable       | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Upland oakwood   | 26/05/2011     | Favourable       | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |

## Condition of Units

| Habitat name                                 | Responsible officer                                  | Feature name | Unit Id | Area (ha) | NNR overlapping area (ha) | Assessment date | Assessment description    | Comment   | Adverse condition reasons |
|--|--|--------------|---------|-----------|---------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| BROADLEAVED, MIXED AND YEW WOODLAND - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 001          | 1004073 | 29.2772   | 29.28                     | 23/06/2011      | Favourable                | Grazing and browsing at acceptable levels to allow for both some natural regeneration and to provide open habitat suitable for lichen and bryophyte communities. Virtually no non-native species present, and exceptionally high quantities of standing and fallen deadwood. All age classes of stand type trees present across the unit.   |                           |
| BROADLEAVED, MIXED AND YEW WOODLAND - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 002          | 1004075 | 15.0536   | 0.00                      | 19/06/2009      | Favourable                | Although high browsing levels have given rise to very poor natural regeneration, there is deemed to be sufficient regeneration potential of climatically native species to sustain the woodland in the long-term. Additionally, this pressure provides the open structure necessary for the breeding bird and lichen interest as well as an extremely high proportion of fallen and standing deadwood not seen in most dartmoor woodlands, which benefits Blue Ground Beetle. |                           |
| BROADLEAVED, MIXED AND YEW WOODLAND - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 003          | 1029265 | 1.6360    | 0.00                      | 01/07/2010      | Unfavourable - Recovering | Unit has been fenced from neighbouring farm and the unit is recovering well and the lichen interest still present.  |                           |
| BROADLEAVED, MIXED AND YEW WOODLAND - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 004          | 1029266 | 3.9152    | 0.00                      | 23/06/2011      | Favourable                | Grazing and browsing at acceptable levels to allow for both some natural regeneration and to provide open habitat suitable for lichen and bryophyte communities. A small amount of non-native species present (rhododendron) but very limited in extent. High quantities of standing and fallen deadwood, especially given the more wood pasture stand type. All age classes of stand type trees present across the unit.   |                           |



## Wistman's Wood SSSI

### Condition of Features

| Feature name                    | Condition date | Condition status | Comment   |
|---------------------------------|----------------|------------------|---|
| Lichen assemblage               | 27/06/2012     | Favourable       | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Short sedge acidic fen (upland) | 11/02/2013     | Favourable       | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Upland oakwood                  | 27/06/2012     | Favourable       | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |

### Condition of Units

| Habitat name                                 | Responsible officer                                  | Feature name | Unit Id | Area (ha) | NNR overlapping area (ha) | Assessment date | Assessment description | Comment   | Adverse condition reasons |
|--|--|--------------|---------|-----------|---------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland                   | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 001          | 1000017 | 169.4724  | 165.54                    | 24/11/2011      | Favourable             | The change in grazing regime and selective Molinia cutting have greatly improved the sward structure and forb diversity of the unit. Mire and wet heath areas are now receiving appropriate levels of grazing where they were previously under-grazed (in recent years).  |                           |
| BROADLEAVED, MIXED AND YEW WOODLAND - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 002          | 1000020 | 3.0561    | 3.06                      | 28/06/2012      | Favourable             | Upland oakwood habitat in very good condition with reasonable levels of standing and fallen deadwood, and aerial photography shows that the extent of the woodland area is (slowly) increasing. A 2011 lichen survey by Coppins has confirmed the Favourable status of the lichen assemblage.   |                           |
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland                   | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 003          | 1000019 | 58.4561   | 0.00                      | 26/10/2012      | Favourable             | Grazed at appropriate levels to sustain relatively short acid grassland sward with numerous tormentil, heath bedstraw, heath milkwort and scattered dwarf shrubs. There is a mid-western band (running north-south) of tall dwarf shrubs dominated by Ulex gallii with some bilberry and heaths. The north east section is wetter, with the sward containing higher percentage cover of sedges, Molinia and Nardus. Close to the river are several very small runnels/flushes containing some narthecium, sphagnum and drosera. |                           |
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland                   | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 004          | 1022220 | 36.9119   | 0.76                      | 17/09/2012      | Favourable             | Grazed at appropriate levels to sustain relatively short acid grassland sward with numerous tormentil, heath bedstraw, heath milkwort and scattered dwarf shrubs. There is a central band (running north-south) of tall dwarf shrubs dominated by Ulex gallii with some bilberry and heaths. There are several very small areas of M21 valley mire near the river containing much narthecium, sphagnum and drosera.   |                           |

# Tor Royal Bog SSSI

## Condition of Features

| Feature name                        | Condition date | Condition status          | Comment  |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------|--|
| Blanket bog and valley bog (upland) | 13/09/2012     | Unfavourable - Recovering | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. Confidence in this feature's recorded condition was assessed as low on 15/11/2023. This assessment is part of Natural England's desk-based assessment project, which uses existing records and earth observations to verify if we are confident in the baseline feature condition, which has been assigned from information recorded at the unit scale. This information can be used to help prioritise features for monitoring. |
| Short sedge acidic fen (upland)     | 13/09/2012     | Unfavourable - Recovering | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment.  |

## Condition of Units

| Habitat name  | Responsible officer                                  | Feature name | Unit Id | Area (ha) | NNR overlapping area (ha) | Assessment date | Assessment description    | Comment  | Adverse condition reasons |
|---------------|--|--------------|---------|-----------|---------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|--|---------------------------|
| BOGS - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 001          | 1004136 | 24.4838   | 0.00                      | 13/09/2012      | Favourable                | In quadrats, mean of 7.4 positive indicator species for blanket bog. % cover of positive indicator species = 64%. Managed under HLS agreement. |                           |
| BOGS - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 002          | 1004137 | 34.6947   | 0.00                      | 01/01/2013      | Unfavourable - Recovering | HLS agreement in place 2012 - grazing regime now adjusted so should improve condition of over and under-grazed areas                           |                           |

# North Dartmoor SSSI

## Condition of Features

| Feature name   | Condition date | Condition status          | Comment   |
|--|----------------|---------------------------|---|
| Acid grassland (upland)  | 14/08/2013     | Unfavourable - Recovering | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Assemblages of breeding birds - Upland moorland and grassland with water bodies                  | 07/05/2013     | Unfavourable - Recovering | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Assemblages of breeding birds - Upland moorland and grassland without water bodies               | 06/08/2013     | Favourable                | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Atlantic salmon, <i>Salmo salar</i>  | 01/01/1900     | Not Recorded              | This is a default baseline feature condition assessment added because there was no unit-specific condition available.   |
| Blanket bog and valley bog (upland)  | 01/10/2019     | Unfavourable - No change  | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| FB - Quaternary of South-West England  | 07/05/2013     | Favourable                | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Lichen assemblage  | 06/08/2013     | Favourable                | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Lowland dry heath  | 01/01/1900     | Not Recorded              | This is a default baseline feature condition assessment added because there was no unit-specific condition available.   |
| Nationally rare and scarce dragonfly species - <i>Coenagrion mercuriale</i> , Southern Damselfly | 01/01/1900     | Not Recorded              | This is a default baseline feature condition assessment added because there was no unit-specific condition available.   |
| Otter, <i>Lutra lutra</i>  | 01/01/1900     | Not Recorded              | This is a default baseline feature condition assessment added because there was no unit-specific condition available.   |
| Short sedge acidic fen (upland)  | 14/02/2013     | Unfavourable - Recovering | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Soakaway and sump (upland)   | 01/01/1900     | Not Recorded              | This is a default baseline feature condition assessment added because there was no unit-specific condition available.   |
| Subalpine dwarf-shrub heath  | 01/10/2019     | Unfavourable - No change  | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Transition mire, ladder fen and quaking bog (upland)   | 01/01/1900     | Not Recorded              | This is a default baseline feature condition assessment added because there was no unit-specific condition available.   |
| Upland oakwood   | 06/08/2013     | Favourable                | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Wet heath (upland)   | 01/10/2019     | Unfavourable - No change  | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |

## Condition of Units

| Habitat name | Responsible officer | Feature name | Unit Id | Area (ha) | NNR overlapping area (ha) | Assessment date | Assessment description | Comment | Adverse condition reasons |
|--------------|---------------------|--------------|---------|-----------|---------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|---------|---------------------------|
|--------------|---------------------|--------------|---------|-----------|---------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|---------|---------------------------|

|                               |  |     |         |          |      |            |                              |  |
|-------------------------------|--|-----|---------|----------|------|------------|------------------------------|--|
| DWARF SHRUB<br>HEATH - Upland | Devon,<br>Cornwall &<br>Isles of Scilly<br>Area Delivery<br>Team | 074 | 1031039 | 123.7406 | 0.00 | 29/07/2013 | Unfavourable<br>- Recovering | Peter Tavy is assessed as unfavourable recovering because:90% of sample points in dry heath habitat fail on the cover of dwarf shrubs.90% of sample points in dry heath habitat fail on % of dwarf shrub shoots browsed.16% of samples points in wet heath habitat fail on damage to sphagnum.26% of sample points in wet heath habitat fail on cover of bare ground.52% of sample points in wet heath habitat fail on cover of ericoids.42% of sample points in wet heath habitat fail on cover of indicator species.68% of sample points within wet heath habitat fail on presence of peat erosion.HLS agreement in place so recovery expected over time.  |
| DWARF SHRUB<br>HEATH - Upland | Devon,<br>Cornwall &<br>Isles of Scilly<br>Area Delivery<br>Team | 075 | 1031040 | 886.0991 | 0.00 | 14/08/2013 | Unfavourable<br>- Recovering | Willsworthy and Standon Hill is assessed as unfavourable recovering because:Acid grassland - 30% of samples within acid grassland habitats fail on the cover of Juncus squarrosus (Heath Rush) and 25% of samples fail on cover of Bracken, trees and scrub.Blanket bog - 28% of samples within blanket bog habitat fail on cover of bare ground. 38 % of sample points fail on number of indicator species present. 95% of sample points fail on % of dwarf shrub shoots browsed. 62 % of sample points fail on presence of erosion. 38% of sample points fail on evidence of burning into the peat.Dwarf shrub heath - 60% of sample points fail on cover of indicator species. 75% of sample points fail on % of dwarf shrubs browsed.Wet heath - 62% of sample points fail on cover of ericoids. 90% of sample points fail of cover of graminoids. 76% of sample points fail on cover of indicator species. 71% of smaple points fail on % of dwarf shrubs browsed.A HLS agreement is in place and recovery is expected over time. |
| DWARF SHRUB<br>HEATH - Upland | Devon,<br>Cornwall &<br>Isles of Scilly<br>Area Delivery<br>Team | 076 | 1031041 | 485.5081 | 0.00 | 30/07/2013 | Unfavourable<br>- Recovering | Lydford Common is assessed as unfavourable recovering because:In acid grassland habitats - 79% of sample points fail on cover of non-grass flowering plants. 63% of sample points fail on cover of Bracken, trees and scrub. 63% of sample points fail on cover of heath rush.In dry heath habitats - 90% of sample points fail on % of dwarf shrubs browsed. 35% of sample points fail on cover of indicator species. 40% of sample points fail on cover of dwarf shrubs. 25% of sample points fail on the number of dwarf shrubs. In wet heath habitats - 90% of sample points fail on % of dwarf shrubs browsed. 36% of sample points fail on cover of ericoids. 27% of sample points fail on damage to sphagnum. 45% of sample points fail on cover of grasses. 36% of sample points fail on cover of indicator species. 32% of sample points fail on cover of soft rushA HLS agreement is in place and recovery is expected over time.  |

|                               |  |     |         |           |      |            |                              |   |
|-------------------------------|--|-----|---------|-----------|------|------------|------------------------------|---|
| DWARF SHRUB<br>HEATH - Upland | Devon,<br>Cornwall &<br>Isles of Scilly<br>Area Delivery<br>Team | 077 | 1031042 | 1151.4550 | 0.00 | 30/07/2013 | Unfavourable<br>- Recovering | Bridestowe and Sourton Common is assessed as unfavourable recovering because: In acid grassland habitats - 100% of sample points fail on cover of flowering plants other than grasses. 28% of sample points fail on cover of dead plant litter. 33% of sample points fail on cover of Bracken, trees and scrub. 28% of sample points fail on cover of soft rush. In blanket bog habitats 18% of sample points fail on cover of indicator species. 21% of sample points fail on % of heather browsed. 19% of sample points fail on presence of erosion. In dry heath habitats - 20% of sample points fail on cover of indicator species. 55% of sample points fail on cover of dwarf shrubs. 45% of sample points fail on the number of dwarf shrubs. 90% of sample points fail on the % of dwarf shrubs browsed. In wet heath habitats: 74% of sample points fail on cover of ericoids. 74% of sample points fail on the cover of grasses. 56% of sample points fail on the cover of indicator species. 35% of sample points fail on the presence of erosion. A HLS agreement is in place and recovery is expected over time. |
| DWARF SHRUB<br>HEATH - Upland | Devon,<br>Cornwall &<br>Isles of Scilly<br>Area Delivery<br>Team | 078 | 1031043 | 1283.9651 | 0.00 | 30/07/2013 | Unfavourable<br>- Recovering | Okehampton Common is assessed as unfavourable recovering because: In dry heath habitats - 71% of sample points fail on the cover of indicator species. 81% of sample points fail on the cover of dwarf shrubs. 95% of sample points fail on the % of dwarf shrubs browsed. In wet heath habitats - 20% of sample points fail on damage to sphagnum. 30% of sample points fail on cover of bare ground. 95% of sample points fail on cover of ericoids. 65% of sample points fail on cover of grasses. 35% of sample points fail on cover of indicators. 35% of sample points fail on cover of soft rush. 80% of sample points fail on browsing of dwarf shrubs. A HLS agreement is in place and recovery is expected in time.   |
| DWARF SHRUB<br>HEATH - Upland | Devon,<br>Cornwall &<br>Isles of Scilly<br>Area Delivery<br>Team | 079 | 1031044 | 240.8355  | 0.00 | 14/08/2013 | Unfavourable<br>- Recovering | Belstone Common is assessed as unfavourable recovering because: In acid grassland habitats - 20% of sample points fail on cover of flowering plants other than grasses. 70% of sample points fail on cover of dead plant litter. 60% of sample points fail on cover of Bracken, trees and scrub. 25% of sample points fail on cover of soft rush. In dry heath habitats - 54% of sample points fail on cover of indicator species. 18% of sample points fail on cover of bare ground. 64% of sample points fail on % of dwarf shrubs browsed. 18% of sample points fail on cover of negative indicators. A HLS agreement is in place and recovery is expected over time.  |
| DWARF SHRUB<br>HEATH - Upland | Devon,<br>Cornwall &<br>Isles of Scilly<br>Area Delivery<br>Team | 080 | 1031045 | 926.9448  | 0.00 | 30/07/2013 | Unfavourable<br>- Recovering | South Tawton Common is assessed as unfavourable recovering because: Wet Heath habitats: 86% of sample points fail on dwarf shrub shoots browsed (non-pioneer), 100% of sample points fail on dwarf shrub shoots browsed (pioneer), 76% of sample points fail on % cover of graminoids, 76% of sample points fail on % cover of ericoids, 24% of sample points fail on proportion of sphagnum damaged, 14% of sample points fail on cover of disturbed bare ground. Dry Heath habitat: 90% of sample points fail on proportion of heather shoots browsed/grazed (non-pioneer), 59% of sample points fail on % of Table 1 vegn cover. Blanket bog habitat: 54% of sample points fail on proportion of heather shoots browsed/grazed (non-pioneer)   |

|                            |  |     |         |          |      |            |                           |   |
|----------------------------|--|-----|---------|----------|------|------------|---------------------------|---|
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 081 | 1031046 | 406.2607 | 0.00 | 30/07/2013 | Unfavourable - Recovering | Throleigh Common is assessed as unfavourable recovering because: Wet Heath habitats: 60% of sample points fail on % cover of ericoids, 25% of sample points fail on % cover Juncus effusus. Dry Heath habitat: 85% of sample points fail on proportion of heather shoots browsed/grazed (non-pioneer), 81% of sample points fail on % of Table 1 vegn cover. Possible 20% of sample points fail on cover bare ground but unclear as to whether this   |
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 082 | 1031047 | 770.2153 | 0.00 | 30/07/2013 | Unfavourable - Recovering | Gidleigh Common is assessed as unfavourable recovering because: Wet Heath habitats: 55% of sample points fail on % cover Group (1) 40% of sample points fail on % cover of ericoids, 75% of sample points fail on dwarf shrub shoots browsed (non-pioneer). Dry Heath habitat: 37% of sample points failed on number of moss/liverwort/non-crustose lichen. 30% of sample points failed on 2 indicators from Table 1, Group i being present.  |
| BOGS - Upland              | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 083 | 1031048 | 455.7448 | 0.00 | 04/10/2019 | Unfavourable - No change  | Visited as part of North Dartmoor site check NEFU project. Habitat features (mires and dry- and wet heaths) were assessed across several units by means of a large number of samples recording all standard condition attributes. Data and a brief summary report are filed in Content Manager under record number D2020/00074342. All three features were found to be unfavourable across the majority of the survey area due to significant failures to meet acceptable thresholds for cover/frequency of positive indicator species in all habitats and in particular for cover of dwarf-shrubs in heathland features. In most cases the driver of poor condition seems to be the expansion of Molinia in both mires and heaths and this may reflect a combination of insufficient grazing in the main growing season, but also probably the continuing effects of historical drainage and/or turbary, perhaps in combination with climate change and nitrogen deposition. Condition was noted as being positively affected in areas where re-wetting/ peatland-restoration measures have been undertaken. |
| BOGS - Upland              | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 084 | 1031049 | 395.6965 | 0.00 | 04/10/2019 | Unfavourable - No change  | Visited as part of North Dartmoor site check NEFU project. Habitat features (mires and dry- and wet heaths) were assessed across several units by means of a large number of samples recording all standard condition attributes. Data and a brief summary report are filed in Content Manager under record number D2020/00074342. All three features were found to be unfavourable across the majority of the survey area due to significant failures to meet acceptable thresholds for cover/frequency of positive indicator species in all habitats and in particular for cover of dwarf-shrubs in heathland features. In most cases the driver of poor condition seems to be the expansion of Molinia in both mires and heaths and this may reflect a combination of insufficient grazing in the main growing season, but also probably the continuing effects of historical drainage and/or turbary, perhaps in combination with climate change and nitrogen deposition. Condition was noted as being positively affected in areas where re-wetting/ peatland-restoration measures have been undertaken. |

|               |  |     |         |           |      |            |                             |   |
|---------------|--|-----|---------|-----------|------|------------|-----------------------------|---|
| BOGS - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 085 | 1031050 | 613.4549  | 0.00 | 04/10/2019 | Unfavourable<br>- No change | Visited as part of North Dartmoor site check NEFU project. Habitat features (mires and dry- and wet heaths) were assessed across several units by means of a large number of samples recording all standard condition attributes. Data and a brief summary report are filed in Content Manager under record number D2020/00074342. All three features were found to be unfavourable across the majority of the survey area due to significant failures to meet acceptable thresholds for cover/frequency of positive indicator species in all habitats and in particular for cover of dwarf-shrubs in heathland features. In most cases the driver of poor condition seems to be the expansion of Molinia in both mires and heaths and this may reflect a combination of insufficient grazing in the main growing season, but also probably the continuing effects of historical drainage and/or turbary, perhaps in combination with climate change and nitrogen deposition. Condition was noted as being positively affected in areas where re-wetting/ peatland-restoration measures have been undertaken. |
| BOGS - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 086 | 1031051 | 760.5898  | 0.00 | 04/10/2019 | Unfavourable<br>- No change | Visited as part of North Dartmoor site check NEFU project. Habitat features (mires and dry- and wet heaths) were assessed across several units by means of a large number of samples recording all standard condition attributes. Data and a brief summary report are filed in Content Manager under record number D2020/00074342. All three features were found to be unfavourable across the majority of the survey area due to significant failures to meet acceptable thresholds for cover/frequency of positive indicator species in all habitats and in particular for cover of dwarf-shrubs in heathland features. In most cases the driver of poor condition seems to be the expansion of Molinia in both mires and heaths and this may reflect a combination of insufficient grazing in the main growing season, but also probably the continuing effects of historical drainage and/or turbary, perhaps in combination with climate change and nitrogen deposition. Condition was noted as being positively affected in areas where re-wetting/ peatland-restoration measures have been undertaken. |
| BOGS - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 087 | 1031052 | 2522.7744 | 0.00 | 04/10/2019 | Unfavourable<br>- No change | Visited as part of North Dartmoor site check NEFU project. Habitat features (mires and dry- and wet heaths) were assessed across several units by means of a large number of samples recording all standard condition attributes. Data and a brief summary report are filed in Content Manager under record number D2020/00074342. All three features were found to be unfavourable across the majority of the survey area due to significant failures to meet acceptable thresholds for cover/frequency of positive indicator species in all habitats and in particular for cover of dwarf-shrubs in heathland features. In most cases the driver of poor condition seems to be the expansion of Molinia in both mires and heaths and this may reflect a combination of insufficient grazing in the main growing season, but also probably the continuing effects of historical drainage and/or turbary, perhaps in combination with climate change and nitrogen deposition. Condition was noted as being positively affected in areas where re-wetting/ peatland-restoration measures have been undertaken. |

|                            |  |     |         |           |      |            |                             |  |
|----------------------------|--|-----|---------|-----------|------|------------|-----------------------------|--|
| BOGS - Upland              | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 088 | 1031053 | 769.1204  | 0.00 | 04/10/2019 | Unfavourable<br>- No change | Visited as part of North Dartmoor site check NEFU project. Habitat features (mires and dry- and wet heaths) were assessed across several units by means of a large number of samples recording all standard condition attributes. Data and a brief summary report are filed in Content Manager under record number D2020/00074342. All three features were found to be unfavourable across the majority of the survey area due to significant failures to meet acceptable thresholds for cover/frequency of positive indicator species in all habitats and in particular for cover of dwarf-shrubs in heathland features. In most cases the driver of poor condition seems to be the expansion of Molinia in both mires and heaths and this may reflect a combination of insufficient grazing in the main growing season, but also probably the continuing effects of historical drainage and/or turbarry, perhaps in combination with climate change and nitrogen deposition. Condition was noted as being positively affected in areas where re-wetting/ peatland-restoration measures have been undertaken. |
| BOGS - Upland              | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 089 | 1031054 | 1245.4782 | 0.00 | 04/10/2019 | Unfavourable<br>- No change | Visited as part of North Dartmoor site check NEFU project. Habitat features (mires and dry- and wet heaths) were assessed across several units by means of a large number of samples recording all standard condition attributes. Data and a brief summary report are filed in Content Manager under record number D2020/00074342. All three features were found to be unfavourable across the majority of the survey area due to significant failures to meet acceptable thresholds for cover/frequency of positive indicator species in all habitats and in particular for cover of dwarf-shrubs in heathland features. In most cases the driver of poor condition seems to be the expansion of Molinia in both mires and heaths and this may reflect a combination of insufficient grazing in the main growing season, but also probably the continuing effects of historical drainage and/or turbarry, perhaps in combination with climate change and nitrogen deposition. Condition was noted as being positively affected in areas where re-wetting/ peatland-restoration measures have been undertaken. |
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 090 | 1031100 | 491.5878  | 0.00 | 04/10/2019 | Unfavourable<br>- No change | Visited as part of North Dartmoor site check NEFU project. Habitat features (mires and dry- and wet heaths) were assessed across several units by means of a large number of samples recording all standard condition attributes. Data and a brief summary report are filed in Content Manager under record number D2020/00074342. All three features were found to be unfavourable across the majority of the survey area due to significant failures to meet acceptable thresholds for cover/frequency of positive indicator species in all habitats and in particular for cover of dwarf-shrubs in heathland features. In most cases the driver of poor condition seems to be the expansion of Molinia in both mires and heaths and this may reflect a combination of insufficient grazing in the main growing season, but also probably the continuing effects of historical drainage and/or turbarry, perhaps in combination with climate change and nitrogen deposition. Condition was noted as being positively affected in areas where re-wetting/ peatland-restoration measures have been undertaken. |



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|  |  |     |         |         |       |            |            |
|--|--|-----|---------|---------|-------|------------|------------|
| BROADLEAVED,<br>MIXED AND<br>YEW<br>WOODLAND -<br>Upland | Devon,<br>Cornwall &<br>Isles of Scilly<br>Area Delivery<br>Team | 091 | 1031114 | 29.8886 | 29.89 | 06/08/2013 | Favourable |
|--|--|-----|---------|---------|-------|------------|------------|

## South Dartmoor SSSI

### Condition of Features

| Feature name   | Condition date | Condition status          | Comment   |
|--|----------------|---------------------------|---|
| Acid grassland (upland)                              | 03/02/2021     | Unfavourable - Recovering | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Atlantic salmon, <i>Salmo salar</i>                  | 01/01/1900     | Not Recorded              | This is a default baseline feature condition assessment added because there was no unit-specific condition available.   |
| Blanket bog and valley bog (upland)                  | 24/05/2011     | Unfavourable - Declining  | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| FB - Quaternary of South-West England                | 01/02/2017     | Favourable                | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Mire grasslands and rush pastures (upland)           | 01/01/1900     | Not Recorded              | This is a default baseline feature condition assessment added because there was no unit-specific condition available.   |
| Otter, <i>Lutra lutra</i>                            | 01/01/1900     | Not Recorded              | This is a default baseline feature condition assessment added because there was no unit-specific condition available.   |
| Short sedge acidic fen (upland)                      | 03/02/2021     | Favourable                | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Soakaway and sump (upland)                           | 03/02/2021     | Favourable                | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Subalpine dwarf-shrub heath                          | 03/02/2021     | Unfavourable - Recovering | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |
| Transition mire, ladder fen and quaking bog (upland) | 01/01/1900     | Not Recorded              | This is a default baseline feature condition assessment added because there was no unit-specific condition available.   |
| Wet heath (upland)                                   | 03/02/2021     | Not Recorded              | This baseline feature condition has been calculated from the historic unit-specific conditions. The condition assigned to the feature is the least favourable of the unit-specific conditions previously recorded for the feature. The status date is the assessment date of the lowest ranking assessment. |

### Condition of Units

| Habitat name               | Responsible officer                                  | Feature name | Unit Id | Area (ha) | NNR overlapping area (ha) | Assessment date | Assessment description    | Comment   | Adverse condition reasons |
|----------------------------|--|--------------|---------|-----------|---------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| BOGS - Upland              | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 003          | 1021342 | 259.9171  | 0.00                      | 16/06/2011      | Favourable                | Despite being much drier than usual (exceptionally dry season), the mires are in good condition. A wide range of mire types present with high Sphagnum cover (several spp noted present), abundant cottongrass in flower and a good selection of mire indicator species. Grasshopper Warbler and Snipe showing breeding evidence, Meadow Pipit nest found.                            |                           |
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 008          | 1021461 | 48.2269   | 0.00                      | 06/07/2011      | Unfavourable - Recovering | Dean Moor is assessed as unfavourable recovering because: In dry heath habitats - 75% of sample points fail on the cover of indicator species from Table 1. 35% of sample points fail on the cover of non-pioneer dwarf shrubs browsed. 15% of sample points fail on the % cover of <i>Juncus effusus</i> . Wet heath habitats ? present on site but not listed as features for unit. |                           |

|                            |  |     |         |          |      |            |                           |   |                            |
|----------------------------|--|-----|---------|----------|------|------------|---------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 009 | 1021462 | 156.2096 | 0.00 | 06/07/2011 | Unfavourable - Recovering | Huntington Warren is assessed as unfavourable recovering because: In dry heath habitats - 30% of sample points fail on the cover of non-pioneer dwarf shrubs browsed. 25% of sample points fail on the % cover of Juncus effusus. Wet heath habitats ? present on site but not listed as features for unit.   |                            |
| BOGS - Upland              | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 010 | 1003870 | 272.7296 | 0.00 | 06/10/2014 | Unfavourable - Declining  | South Brent Common (CL161 A and B) was subjected to a Rapid Appraisal Survey to assess compliance with Single Payment Scheme GAEC code 9. The common failed to meet the threshold targets and is therefore classed as overgrazed.   | AGRICULTURE - OVERGRAZING, |
| BOGS - Upland              | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 021 | 1021469 | 58.8182  | 0.00 | 08/12/2023 | Favourable                | Good range of age classes created in western gorse-dominated heath. Mire site in good condition with grazing suppressing Molinea growth and no scrub encroachment.  |                            |
| BOGS - Upland              | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 057 | 1031101 | 348.8101 | 0.00 | 14/08/2013 | Unfavourable - Recovering | Overall unit fail. Acid grassland failed on 18 points assessed. Passed on all criteria assessed apart from % forbs cover (all samples failed), % litter cover failed, significant fail % cover live leaves & shoots of forbs (>5cm above gs). Blanket Bog -Peat depth 70cm ?1m+ range. Overall fail. Fails on presence of drainage, erosion, % cover indicator spp., no. indicator species present & no. sphagnum spp. present. Proportion of heather (all ages) browsed. All other criteria assessed passed.Wet heath only 4 sample sites assessed. Sub-alpine dry dwarf-shrub heath only 2 sample sites assessed. Valley Mire ( 15 points assessed) overall fail. Passed on all criteria except % of indicator spp. and number of indicator species (fail).Note: There is likely to be a sample period effect for Upland Mire and a better result may have been obtained outside of the winter period.  |                            |
| BOGS - Upland              | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 058 | 1031102 | 691.4096 | 0.00 | 02/10/2019 | Unfavourable - No change  | Visited as part of North Dartmoor site check NEFU project. Habitat features (mires and dry- and wet heaths) were assessed across several units by means of a large number of samples recording all standard condition attributes. Data and a brief summary report are filed in Content Manager under record number D2020/00074342. All three features were found to be unfavourable across the majority of the survey area due to significant failures to meet acceptable thresholds for cover/frequency of positive indicator species in all habitats and in particular for cover of dwarf-shrubs in heathland features. In most cases the driver of poor condition seems to be the expansion of Molinia in both mires and heaths and this may reflect a combination of insufficient grazing in the main growing season, but also probably the continuing effects of historical drainage and/or turbary, perhaps in combination with climate change and nitrogen deposition. Condition was noted as being positively affected in areas where re-wetting/ peatland-restoration measures have been undertaken. | FIRE - FIRE - OTHER,       |

|                            |  |     |         |           |      |            |                           |   |                            |
|----------------------------|--|-----|---------|-----------|------|------------|---------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| BOGS - Upland              | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 059 | 1031103 | 522.9512  | 0.00 | 02/10/2019 | Unfavourable - No change  | Visited as part of North Dartmoor site check NEFU project. Habitat features (mires and dry- and wet heaths) were assessed across several units by means of a large number of samples recording all standard condition attributes. Data and a brief summary report are filed in Content Manager under record number D2020/00074342. All three features were found to be unfavourable across the majority of the survey area due to significant failures to meet acceptable thresholds for cover/frequency of positive indicator species in all habitats and in particular for cover of dwarf-shrubs in heathland features. In most cases the driver of poor condition seems to be the expansion of Molinia in both mires and heaths and this may reflect a combination of insufficient grazing in the main growing season, but also probably the continuing effects of historical drainage and/or turbary, perhaps in combination with climate change and nitrogen deposition. Condition was noted as being positively affected in areas where re-wetting/ peatland-restoration measures have been undertaken. |                            |
| BOGS - Upland              | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 060 | 1031104 | 375.2480  | 0.00 | 02/10/2019 | Unfavourable - No change  | Visited as part of North Dartmoor site check NEFU project. Habitat features (mires and dry- and wet heaths) were assessed across several units by means of a large number of samples recording all standard condition attributes. Data and a brief summary report are filed in Content Manager under record number D2020/00074342. All three features were found to be unfavourable across the majority of the survey area due to significant failures to meet acceptable thresholds for cover/frequency of positive indicator species in all habitats and in particular for cover of dwarf-shrubs in heathland features. In most cases the driver of poor condition seems to be the expansion of Molinia in both mires and heaths and this may reflect a combination of insufficient grazing in the main growing season, but also probably the continuing effects of historical drainage and/or turbary, perhaps in combination with climate change and nitrogen deposition. Condition was noted as being positively affected in areas where re-wetting/ peatland-restoration measures have been undertaken. |                            |
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 061 | 1031105 | 1253.3960 | 0.00 | 03/10/2023 | Unfavourable - Declining  | Natural England commissioned external contractor to resurvey Unit 61. Leppitt Associates carried out a resurvey of the 2013 CSM survey, resampling 74 points. Resurvey concluded all key habitat types in unfavourable condition and data indicates a decline in both habitat quality and extent for both wet and dry heathland types. Grazing pressure cited as a key driver for this decline in condition. Please refer to report compiled by D. Glaves, dated August 2023 entitled 'A habitat condition resurvey of the Upper Plym Estate in South Dartmoor SSSI'.   | AGRICULTURE - OVERGRAZING, |
| BOGS - Upland              | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 062 | 1031106 | 1682.6093 | 0.00 | 26/07/2013 | Unfavourable - Recovering | Stall and Penn Commons are assessed as unfavourable recovering because: In Acid Grassland habitat ?100% of sample points fail on % cover of forbs, 28% fail on % cover of bracken and/or scattered native trees and scrub, 100% fail on live leaves parameter. In dry heath habitats - 92% of sample points fail on the cover of indicator species from Table 1, 76% fail on browsing on non-pioneer dwarf-shrubs.  |                            |

|                            |  |     |         |          |      |            |                           |   |
|----------------------------|--|-----|---------|----------|------|------------|---------------------------|---|
| BOGS - Upland              | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 063 | 1031107 | 539.1002 | 0.00 | 26/07/2013 | Unfavourable - Recovering | Ugborough and Harford Commons are assessed as unfavourable recovering because: In Wet Heath habitat ? 70% of sample points fail on % browsing of non-pioneer dwarf shrubs, 96% fail on % cover of graminoids, 80% fail on % cover from Table 1.   |
| DWARF SHRUB HEATH - Upland | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 065 | 1031109 | 298.0140 | 0.00 | 24/07/2013 | Unfavourable - Recovering | Buckfastleigh Common is assessed as unfavourable recovering because: In Wet Heath habitat ? 43% of sample points fail on % browsing of non-pioneer dwarf shrubs, 19% fail on cover of Juncus effuses , 76% fail on % cover of graminoids, 91% fail on % cover from Table 1. In Dry Heath habitat ? 90% fail on % cover from Table 1, 66% fail on browsing of non-pioneer dwarf shrubs, 14% fail on cover of Juncus effuses, 33% fail on cover of bracken/ bracken litter. In Acid Grassland habitat - 88% of sample points fail on % cover of forbs, 100% fail on live leaves parameter, 41% fail on thatching parameter 18% fail on cover of Juncus effuses, 100% fail on % cover of bracken and/or scattered native trees and scrub |
| BOGS - Upland              | Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Delivery Team | 067 | 1031111 | 606.3305 | 0.00 | 26/07/2013 | Unfavourable - Recovering | Holne Moor is assessed as unfavourable recovering because: In Wet Heath habitat ? 42% of sample points fail on % browsing of non-pioneer dwarf shrubs, 31% fail on cover of Juncus effuses, 94% fail on % cover from Table 1. In Dry Heath habitat ? 86% fail on % cover from Table 1, 14% fail on cover of Juncus effuses, 52% fail on cover of bracken/ bracken litter. In Acid Grassland habitat - 50% of sample points fail on % cover of forbs, 100% fail on live leaves parameter, 27% fail on thatching parameter, 94% fail on % cover of bracken and/or scattered native trees and scrub. In Blanket Bog habitat ? no data recorded as `no NVC communities present on site? 12/03/2013 Thomson Ecology                        |

# Nature on Dartmoor

[Wes Smyth](#), 14 March 2023 - [wildlife and farming](#)

## **Reflections from Wes Smyth, Natural England's Area Manager on how we ensure Dartmoor's unique wildlife is preserved for future generations.**

Dartmoor is special, a working landscape with wide open moorland framed by steep intimate wooded valleys and a pastoral moorland fringe. It's a beautiful landscape much loved by millions of people who are drawn to Dartmoor to immerse themselves in nature, in the history that has shaped the landscape and to feel part of something much bigger than any one of us. It is a place with a rich natural history, the result of generations of low-intensity farming including transhumance, combined with naturally occurring habitats and species.

Protecting Dartmoor's wildlife for future generations to enjoy will also make an important contribution to the UK's delivery of global targets to protect at least 30% of the world's land and at least 30% of the global ocean by 2030. This will require natural systems to be restored, species populations recovered, and extinctions halted - an ambition recognised in the Dartmoor National Park Partnership Plan. However, it's become clear over the recent years that the relationship between farming, nature and other impacts like climate change are not in balance and nature is declining in a way that may jeopardise the huge value that Dartmoor brings to local communities and visitors.



Okehampton Exlosure , fence removed, March 2023 - Natural England, Eamon Crowe

The UK government has acknowledged that delivering on the ambition of UN Biodiversity Conference (COP 15) will be challenging and will require swift action. The scale of this challenge is evident on the Dartmoor commons where sadly the wildlife that once thrived is no longer as rich or resilient as it once was. On the face of it the wildlife we now experience can seem no different from that enjoyed and experienced by our parents and grandparents. However, memories fade and ecological baselines shift. In the 1980's large areas of Dartmoor's open moorland were designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and later as a Special Area of Conservation reflecting the national and international importance of Dartmoor's moorland wildlife.

Despite the protection these designations provided, and the huge investment of public money in agri-environment schemes, wildlife has declined. Breeding populations of golden plover, red grouse and ring ouzels have now gone or are on the verge of being lost. The large expanses of upland heathland that once characterised the moor are now fragmented and what remains is often in poor ecological condition. Dartmoor's precious peatlands, its blanket bogs on the highest ground and mires in the valley bottoms are still suffering from historic management affecting their ability to store carbon and regulate river flows.



Ring ouzel on cotoneaster bush - Natural England, Peter Roworth

So why has the current approach of protection and incentive through agri-environment schemes not reversed the decline of wildlife on Dartmoor's moorland?

The current High Level Environment Stewardship (HLS) schemes now in place were set up to deliver a range of environmental outcomes including the delivery of SSSI favourable condition (that is the special interest features for which the SSSI was designated are in a healthy state). On those agreements where not all the outcomes have so far been met, we are keen to sit down with agreement holders and talk through how we can support them in delivering on those outcomes.

For some agreements we will need to agree collectively how we can adjust grazing to reduce the impact on heathland vegetation and help control purple moor-grass expansion, explore how shepherding can be used to even out grazing pressure and address the continuing effect of historic peatland drainage. We will need to work with graziers to agree how we can achieve the right animals in the right place at the right time of year. This will take time and a partnership approach given the multiple demands that farm businesses on Dartmoor face.





Okehampton Exlosure, autumn 2022 - Natural England, Justin Gillett

There are of course other factors at play such as air pollution, other land use demands and climate change that have all impacted on Dartmoor's wildlife and the condition of SSSIs. The impact of large-scale burning management will also have played a part. However, we have seen the capacity for nature to recover where farmers support environmental improvements. For example, the number of breeding Dunlin pairs on Dartmoor has shown a positive response following peatland restoration.

Many of the current HLS agreements on Dartmoor's commons are due to expire and as part of the transition to the new Environment Land Management scheme existing agreement holders can seek a voluntary 5-year extension to their agreement. Agreement holders and ourselves can use this 5-year extension opportunity to plan for any changes and agree a way forward, helping provide continuity for farmers during the immediate agricultural transition period and help relieve some of the other pressures farmers are facing.



Dartmoor ESA, Combestone Tor - Natural England, Peter Wakely

In 2020, the Dartmoor National Park set out an ambition to “deliver Nature enhancement at a landscape scale, underpinned by the restoration of dynamic natural processes. Habitats are protected, restored, maintained, cared for, expanded and connected; supported by land management systems and natural capital investment that have the delivery of public goods at their heart.” At Natural England we fully support this commitment and are putting in place changes to support farmers through this transition, through their agri-environment agreements.

The only way to achieve this vision, to a more sustainable future for all stakeholders on Dartmoor is to work in close partnership. We are planning to meet commoners, landowners and the Dartmoor National Park in early April 2023 to try and agree a shared way forward where farmers and landowners feel they have a real stake in the success of their agri-environment agreements. Success would be viable farm business delivering transformational nature recovery on the Dartmoor commons.

**Tags:** [biodiversity](#), [climate change](#), [Dartmoor](#), [farming](#), [Land management](#), [National Parks](#), [Natural England](#), [wildlife](#)

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## Wildlife

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# Fears Natural England may lose powers amid row with Dartmoor farmers

Tory MPs call for ministers, not watchdog, to make decisions on sites of special scientific interest

**Helena Horton** *Environment reporter*

Mon 24 Apr 2023 11.57 BST

Senior Conservative MPs have suggested the nature watchdog [Natural England](#) should be stripped of powers in an overhaul of how it manages England's best wildlife sites, after complaints from landowners.

Wildlife experts have said it is "outrageous" that sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs), which are some of the most important areas for nature in the country, could be "determined by politics rather than science".

Devon Tory MPs and farmers on Dartmoor have been [embroiled in a row](#) with Natural England over its management of the SSSIs on the moor. The watchdog has said taxpayer-funded nature-friendly farming payments could be stripped from farmers who are causing SSSIs to be damaged by overgrazing. It has recommended farmers reduce their sheep stocks.

The Country Land and Business Association (CLA), which represents rural landowners, told the government it was "losing confidence" in Natural [England](#) after it threatened to take away the payments from landowners in charge of failing SSSIs.

The Tory MP Sir Geoffrey Cox has called for an inquiry, saying "we need to look again at the arm's length agencies".

The farming minister Mark Spencer has agreed to hold an inquiry into how Natural England is managing SSSIs on Dartmoor.

During a debate in parliament last week, he said: "I pay tribute to [Cox] for the work that he has done on his plan for us to undertake, as soon as possible, an independent evidence review covering the ecological condition of designated sites on Dartmoor. I subscribe to his view. The plan is worthy of support, and I, alongside the department, will work with him, Natural England and those representatives to undertake that independent review."

The former environment secretary George Eustice suggested Natural England's powers could be weakened now the UK had left the EU. "I looked at arm's length body reform during my tenure at Defra, and the truth is that the structure we have was designed for an EU era," he said. "Many of these agencies were given powers to, effectively, implement EU law directly, and they were specifically designed to bypass democratic structures.

"It is not sensible for Natural England to have to make the decisions on SSSIs. Instead, ministers should take such decisions, having taken advice from Natural England and others, which would restore accountability."

There are fears that this could have wider implications in cases where the financial interests of landowners may clash with Natural England's advice for good management of SSSIs. Some fear that if ministers are in control of management they could

make politically expedient decisions rather than the right choices for nature.

Nature organisations said they had feared for some time that the Conservatives had an agenda to undermine environmental institutions in favour of landowning interests.

Craig Bennett, the chief executive of the Wildlife Trusts, said: “It’s outrageous the government is even thinking right now of weakening or dismantling the very institutional infrastructure that is needed to protect and restore nature in this country.

“We have a proud tradition in Britain of trying to follow the science when trying to make policy when it comes to conservation. But we know we have some in government who would rather move to having ‘sites of political convenience’.

“This is not the time to be undermining our institutions. There have been certain sections of the Conservative party who have been thinking this for many years. It is no surprise they are willing to exploit a slight controversy happening on Dartmoor for their own political ends.”

The RSPB has branded Spencer’s decision a “dangerous and slippery slope”. Its site policy officer, Blanaid Denman, said: “As the legal regulator, Natural England must be allowed to do its job without political interference.

“The outrageous implication that favourable conservation status or appropriate management should be determined by politics, rather than science, is a dangerous and slippery slope, which would not only undermine our ability to meet domestic and international targets but leave nature the poorer.”

Richard Benwell, the chief executive of Wildlife and Countryside Link, said: “To meet its 2030 nature targets, the government should increase the funding available for good management of SSSIs. Land managers should be paid much better than they are now to ensure these vital places for nature are quickly restored. But it’s absolutely right that scientific experts should set the terms of those agreements for public payments, not ministers.”

Caroline Cotterell, director of resilient landscapes and seas at Natural England said: “Natural England has a crucial role to play in delivering the government’s environmental improvement plan across England. There are no planned changes to our role, powers or resources.

“As the statutory advisor and regulator of SSSIs we are working with partners towards the target of bringing 75% of protected sites into favourable condition, and use our scientific expertise when determining where new protected sites are needed. Thriving nature and sustainable farming are inextricably interlinked and we are working with farmers across the country to find solutions that work for both.

“We are working hard with farmers in Dartmoor National Park, alongside Defra and local representatives to improve the damaged SSSIs in the national park. We welcome the independent review into how, together, we can best achieve sustainable farming on Dartmoor”

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has been contacted for comment.

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# A SIGHT FOR SORE SSSIs

ARE ENGLAND'S SITES OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC  
INTEREST IN A WORSE STATE THAN WE THINK?



# A SIGHT FOR SORE SSSIs

## SUMMARY

- 1.** The condition of most (66% by area) Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in England has not been assessed for more than 10 years.

The system has fallen into disrepair and we can have little faith in the published Defra figures.

- 2.** An up-to-date analysis of Natural England's data on SSSI condition shows that SSSI condition is worse than the latest Defra published figures. Things are getting worse.

- 3.** The most recent condition assessments show alarming proportions of SSSI are not improving in condition, we predict that if the backlog of condition assessments was rapidly updated English SSSIs would be shown to be in a much worse state than current estimates admit.

- 4.** Defra and Natural England need to clear the backlog of condition assessments so that the public can see the true state of SSSIs in England.

A total of  
**12,611 units**  
haven't been assessed  
since 2013 or earlier,  
adding up to  
**700,252 hectares**  
of protected  
land.

**Figure 1:** Percentage of SSSI units (by area) in England that were last assessed more than 10 years ago.

# A SIGHT FOR SORE SSSIs

## BACKGROUND

Most countries on Earth have networks of sites designated by the national government to protect wildlife. This reflects the biological reality that although wildlife is everywhere, some places are richer in wildlife than others, and protecting such sites is an important part of a nation's wildlife protection strategy.

In the UK, a wide variety of designations exist, with different origins in legislation and with varying levels of protection. At the core of UK wildlife protection are those sites designated since their introduction following the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act as Sites of Scientific Interest (SSSIs, and Areas of Special Scientific Interest, ASSIs, in Northern Ireland). It is generally accepted that SSSIs are a crucial wildlife designation which should usually prevent the destruction of those sites and encourage their wildlife-friendly management. Although the name Site of Special Scientific Interest is a bit of a mouthful, SSSIs should be just that; places which are interesting and special for wildlife.

There are nearly 7,000 SSSIs and ASSIs in the UK. They vary from tiny sites, not much bigger than a back garden, to large upland areas of many thousands of hectares. The protection of these special wildlife sites is fundamental to the UK's ability to protect its wildlife. These are special places where wildlife should thrive, whether they be Sphagnum-dominated bogs home to rare dragonflies, meadows packed with insects and wildflowers, estuaries full of wading birds, or clear flowing rivers shimmering with fish. SSSIs are places where nature should be doing alright. Except, we suspect that it isn't.

Nature conservation is a devolved issue, which means that notifying SSSIs and ensuring their protection has been the responsibility of national administrations in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales for many years. Understandably, over the past 20+ years the details of how SSSIs are notified, monitored and protected have changed slightly but importantly in each UK nation. It is no

longer possible to produce a UK overview of the system except by producing four national overviews.

This report focuses solely on the English situation. That is not because Wild Justice thinks that wildlife in England is more important than that elsewhere in the UK but solely because the data are more easily available and interpretable (we would argue) for English SSSIs than for those elsewhere in the UK. Also, of the nearly 7000 SSSIs (and ASSIs) across the UK, over 4,000 are in England. All the data on assessments of condition for English SSSIs, and subdivided into individual parts of the SSSIs (called Units), are published online and are regularly updated. Earlier this year we pointed out to Wild Justice supporters that they could look up their nearest SSSI online and see how Natural England rated its condition. Hundreds of people investigated their local SSSIs and discovered important designated wildlife sites [of which they had been completely unaware](#), or discovered their favourite place for a relaxing walk was one of these special sites.

SSSIs in England are notified by Natural England; the majority selected for their biological interest, and a smaller number for their geological interest. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 gave Natural England more power in the protection of SSSIs. Now, not only are the landowners of SSSIs responsible for not destroying these protected sites, but they have obligations to maintain sites in good condition, and improve sites that aren't. Since the implementation of the act, part of Natural England's job has been to keep an eye on the 'status' of SSSIs. By monitoring and assessing their condition they can be categorised and changes in their condition can be detected. With over 4,000 SSSIs in England, that's a lot of monitoring and evaluation – but it's very important. This work, in order to be accurate, is supposed to be carried out regularly.

So, we thought we'd look into it. We want to know the true current status of our SSSIs, so we submitted a data request to Natural England. The following report summarises our findings on the state of SSSI assessment and the state of SSSIs in England.



# WHAT WE DID

**Our aim was to examine the state of wildlife in SSSIs. A fantastic amount of information is [available online for SSSIs in England](#), but these data are presented site by site and there are thousands of SSSIs. Each SSSI is made up of between 1 and dozens of Units, each of which has been assessed as to its condition. A Unit's condition can be classified in one of the following ways:**

1. Favourable
2. Unfavourable – Recovering
3. Unfavourable – No Change
4. Unfavourable – Declining
5. Part Destroyed
6. Destroyed

In April 2023, Wild Justice wrote to Natural England under the Environment Information Regulations (EIR). In our request, we asked for data on Sites of Special Scientific Interest in England, specifically:

- A list of all Biological SSSIs in England
- The county in which they are found
- Their constituent Units
- The size in hectares of each Unit
- The condition (Favourable, Unfavourable Recovering etc) of each unit
- The year in which each SSSI Unit's condition was assessed by Natural England

In early May, Natural England replied to our request with a full set of data - an Excel spreadsheet with over 2 million cells (over 90,000 rows and 23 columns). The dataset contained SSSI Unit assessments from as long ago as 1998 - but overwhelmingly contained assessments from 2005 to 13 April 2023. Our data set is therefore very up-to-date, and, inevitably, more up to date than previous analyses of SSSI status in England.

## EXCLUDED DATA:

We edited this dataset down to around 285,000 cells (15 columns and 19,000+ rows) where each row contained the relevant data for a single SSSI Unit. Some of the data were excluded from our analyses:

### GEOLOGICAL SSSIS.

We removed all the SSSI Units (around 1800) where 'Earth Heritage' was listed as the main habitat as these are Units of geological interest rather than biological interest. Over three quarters of these sites were of Favourable status, as geological sites are less susceptible to degradation than biological ones. By including these sites in our analysis this would make the status of SSSIs as a whole look better than would be reflected if we were to simply look at biological SSSIs. Geology is important, but it wasn't relevant to our investigation.

### DESTROYED SSSIS.

In our results, we removed the very small number of SSSI Units with 'Destroyed' or 'Part Destroyed' status, as these represented less than 1% of the total units, and area covered by them.

### MISSING ASSESSMENTS.

A very small number of sites had incomplete data.

## ANALYSIS:

We wanted to know how recently English SSSI Units have been assessed and what those assessments show, and so we looked at:

- The year each unit was last assessed by Natural England
- The latest status for each unit
- The area of land that all of these units represent.

# WHAT WE FOUND

This graph shows the **last** year in which SSSI Units were assessed (by area) **not** the area assessed in each year. The low columns in 2000-2007 do not mean that few SSSI Units were assessed in those years but that few SSSI Units were **last** assessed in those years. Some, many, SSSI Units will have been assessed in several years but they each only contribute to one year in this graph.

By analogy, all cars over a certain age need have an annual MoT test, and a similar graph of MoT last dates ought to have very large columns in 2023 and 2022 – any cars occupying earlier years are not allowed to be driven on UK roads. Similarly, if there were an obligation to have your health checked by a doctor every five years then the last five years should have large columns and it would be a measure of how the system was failing if there were large numbers of people without health checks over a much longer

period. Such analogies are apt – the assessment system for SSSI condition in England is failing to keep tabs on most of the SSSI area in the country. To be honest, we simply do not know the condition of most of the SSSI area in England because no-one has looked for so long.

To spell this out even more, the commonest year of last assessment is 2010 – 26% of SSSI by area was last assessed in 2010 (the year when an Icelandic volcano erupted and closed down many international flights in Europe for several weeks, Germany won the Eurovision Song Contest and the UK acquired a coalition government led by David Cameron). Those distant assessments are still being used by Defra in its annual reporting on current SSSI condition – despite them being so very out of date. This is a monitoring system in disrepair.

CRoW Act  
Implemented



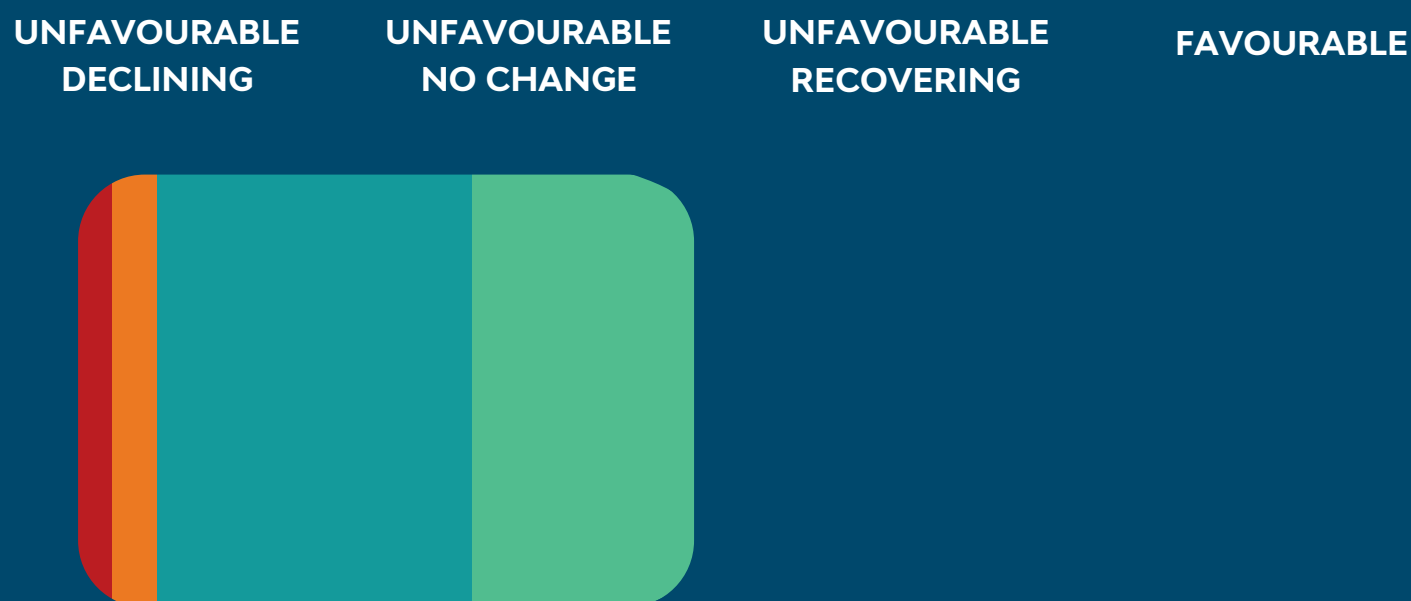
LABOUR GOVERNMENT

CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT

**Figure 2:** Area of SSSI Units (hectares) last assessed in each year, between 2000 and 2023. Note: year of last assessment does not equal number of assessments for that year.

# WHAT WE FOUND

The overall status of SSSIs (by area) breaks down as follows:



**Figure 3:** Overall proportion of SSSI Unit areas (ha) of each condition status

However, in Figure 4 we can see the proportion of sites classed as 'Unfavourable - Declining', and 'Unfavourable - No Change' are higher in the Units that were assessed more recently.

We can also see the area of SSSI land classified as 'Unfavourable - Recovering', and 'Favourable' are smaller in those that have been more recently assessed.

**Figure 4:** Proportion of SSSI Unit areas (ha) of each condition status, in three time periods; those last assessed before 2011, those assessed between 2011 and 2020, and those assessed from 2021 – 2023.

# HOW THE CONDITION ASSESSMENTS CHANGE OVER TIME:

## FAVOURABLE

In sites last assessed before 2011, 41% (by area) was classed as 'Favourable' by Natural England. For sites assessed in 2021-23 this dropped to 27%.

If SSSI condition has gradually declined, this only becomes apparent as sites with out-of-date assessments are slowly re-assessed.

**Figure 5:** Proportion of SSSI Unit areas (ha) last assessed in three time periods and assessed as being in Favourable condition.

## UNFAVOURABLE - RECOVERING

A similar and more pronounced difference can be seen in SSSI Units classed as 'Unfavourable-Recovering'.

The total SSSI land area with this classification is 55% in sites last assessed before 2011, but only 27% in sites assessed from 2021.

**Figure 6:** Proportion of SSSI Unit areas (ha) last assessed in three time periods and assessed as being in Unfavourable - Recovering condition.

## UNFAVOURABLE - NO CHANGE

When we look at SSSI Units classed as 'Unfavourable - No Change', the opposite trend can be seen.

Only 2% of SSSI land area had this classification in Units assessed before 2011. In units assessed from 2021, this sits at 14%.

**Figure 7:** Proportion of SSSI Unit areas (ha) last assessed in three time periods and assessed as being in Unfavourable - No Change condition.

## UNFAVOURABLE - DECLINING

Even more pronounced is the difference in the proportion of SSSI land area with 'Unfavourable' status between years of last assessment.

Only 1% of land area has this status in Units last assessed before 2011, but in more recently assessed Units, the total area leaps up to 31%.

**Figure 8:** Proportion of SSSI Unit areas (ha) last assessed in three time periods and assessed as being in Unfavourable - Declining condition.

# WHAT WE LEARNED

## 1. THE STATUS OF BIOLOGICAL SSSIS IN ENGLAND IS WORSE THAN WE THOUGHT

Our analysis reveals that the overall proportion of the area of SSSI in Favourable condition is only 36% and the proportion in Unfavourable Recovering is 50%. These figures are worse than the previous published assessment by government in March 2022 which showed that 38% of SSSIs were in Favourable condition and 51% were in Unfavourable Recovering. Defra has a target of 95% of SSSIs being in Favourable or Unfavourable Recovering condition – a target which it misses by a [slightly larger margin each year](#). Defra claims that 89% of SSSIs are in this category and that they are thus 6% short of the 95% target. We claim that the real figure is 86%, 9% short of the 95% target.

Why is this? First, we have excluded geological SSSIs from this analysis – we have looked solely at biological SSSIs and they are the ones in poorest condition. The inclusion of geological SSSIs in previous reports has partly obscured the true status of biological SSSIs. Second, we believe that Natural England is now using more realistic criteria for assessing SSSI Unit condition and this is revealing that the previous assessment methods hid the fact that condition is declining. Third, our analysis is the most up-to-date and is consistent with the suggestion that SSSI condition is declining in England.

Our analysis shows that Defra is further away from the 95% target figure than it claims, and that the gap between reality and target grows every year.

## 2. THE SSSI ASSESSMENT PROCESS IN ENGLAND HAS FALLEN INTO DISREPAIR.

Our Figure 2 reveals for the very first time that the assessments of most SSSI units in England are way out of date. This, to the best of our knowledge, is the first time that these data have been published in this form, though Natural England must have been well aware of them – they are Natural

England's data! Defra also should have been well aware of these figures.

A decade is a long time to be left without assessment and quite frankly gaps of this sort mean that we don't really know the condition of most of our most important wildlife sites and whether they are doing the job required for wildlife protection. Reduced budgets and capacity since the arrival of a Conservative administration (initially a Coalition Government) have meant that Natural England has done a poor job for protected sites. This is largely due to budget cuts but Natural England must shoulder some of the blame in that it has not squealed loudly enough, not enlisted NGO support for change and not allocated other funds to this central role of England's wildlife guardian and regulator.

It would be reasonable to treat those SSSI Units which were last assessed over 10 years ago, 66% of the total area, as Status Unknown in future assessments. We cannot have confidence that their outdated condition assessments are valid.

## 3. MIGHT THE STATUS OF ENGLISH SSSIS BE EVEN WORSE THAN REVEALED HERE?

Yes, very probably. When all the SSSI Units that have not been assessed for over a decade are assessed we believe that the situation will prove to be even worse than it already seems. That view is consistent with the findings in Figure 4 – more recently assessed SSSI Units are in far worse condition than ones that have been unassessed for over a decade.

An entirely plausible possibility (not a worst case scenario by any means) is that if all SSSIs in England were assessed in the next few years then their condition would resemble the most recent condition assessments made in the last three calendar years. If so, only only 54% of sites by area would be Favourable or Unfavourable Recovering and so far from being 6% off target as Defra claim, or 9% off target as our analysis suggests, the real situation could be that Defra is 41% off target – a truly awful position.

# WHAT SHOULD CHANGE?

## WILD JUSTICE'S VIEW:

- 1.** Defra, and Natural England, should publish annual updates on the condition of English SSSIs which in future should include information, as does this report in Figure 2, of the assessment years of all English SSSI Units. This would show whether the dataset was based on recent estimates.
- 2.** A rapid catch-up needs to be carried out in the next few years so that 80% of English SSSI Units have had their condition assessed in the last 5 years – that would be a considerable turnaround from the present situation.
- 3.** Natural England should carry out an urgent review of the resources needed to ensure that English SSSIs are in Favourable condition. That report must be published at the time it is made available to government. It should be predicated on the need for 95% of English SSSIs to be in Favourable or Unfavourable Recovering condition by the 2030 deadline, based on 80% of assessments being carried out in the period 2025-2029.



# Dartmoor: achieving a future with thriving agriculture and thriving nature

[Dave Slater](#), 28 July 2023 - [Biodiversity](#), [Environment Act](#), [Farming](#), [Landscapes](#), [National Nature Reserve](#), [Natural England](#), [Protected sites and species](#), [Science and evidence](#), [Wildlife](#), [wildlife and farming](#)



*Image: Natural England*

*By Dave Slater, NE Regional Director for the South West*

Since our previous [blog](#) reflecting on the condition of Dartmoor's special habitats there has been a lot of public discourse on what should happen on Dartmoor's sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs). There are strong feelings on all sides; many have been expressed in the media. Some feel that radical action is needed now to halt the decline of these precious habitats, while others feel that we should preserve the status quo to protect local farming interests at a time of uncertainty and rising costs. The answer, as always, is somewhere in between.

As the government's statutory advisor on nature conservation, Natural England's role is to provide advice on the management of SSSIs and we have a legal responsibility to ensure management of protected sites is done in a way that leads to 'favourable condition'. In the case of the Dartmoor commons, favourable condition means a mosaic of habitats containing gorse, heather, bogs and other upland plant species, that support species such as curlew and golden plover which were once common across the South West uplands. This vegetation also protects the peat and helps prevent carbon being released into the atmosphere, contributing to climate change. Anyone who has walked across heather and gorse dominated areas in the summer when they are in flower will know what a breath-taking landscape this can be.



*Image: Natural England - over grazed heather and other dwarf shrubs.*

These habitats rely on grazing to maintain the mixture of plant species needed, but too much grazing at the wrong time of year can lead to a domination of grasses and the loss of the structure that is needed for wildlife to flourish. During the winter when grass availability is reduced sheep will browse the new growth of heather and bilberry. This grazing pressure will, over time, lead to a sharp decline in heather cover. The impact of sheep on heathland vegetation is further compounded by the over dominance of purple moor-grass (*Molinia*) from a lack of summer grazing by cattle and historic drainage. As purple moor-grass is unpalatable during the winter this results in the sheep grazing being concentrated on the drier heathland habitats further compounding the damaging impact of winter sheep grazing. In some areas our monitoring data suggests that heather cover has reduced from 25% to 1% over recent years. This data does, however, show that small heather shoots are present



across much of the site – albeit in a fragile state and restoration would be possible with the right grazing management in place.

Grazing by ponies and cattle over the summer months is the key to restoring areas currently dominated by purple moor-grass if they can be kept from drifting off. We know from listening to commoners and land managers on Dartmoor that when you have stock on large open unfenced commons it is difficult to get them to do exactly what you want. Many sheep have learnt their boundaries over generations, so called hefted flocks (known as leering on Dartmoor). However, as habitats change and management varies from common to common this is difficult to maintain and stocking rates cannot be changed overnight.

Over the last six months or so we have done a lot of listening – I have walked the moors with ecologists, farmers, conservation organisations and landowners and discussed pressure, problems and solutions. We have listened to local MPs concerned about their constituents and read with interest the different views in the media. I have been struck by just how much we all agree on the long-term vision for Dartmoor – thriving agriculture and thriving nature. Yet deep divisions remain on how we get there and what steps we need to take and when.

Following the Westminster Hall debate in April on farming in Dartmoor, Ministers recognised the need for an [independent evidence review](#) to look at how these SSSIs should be managed into the future. This is now being taken forward by Defra who have appointed David Fursdon as its chair.

NE has always supported the idea of an evidence review – it is vital that all parties have faith on the evidence which affects the decisions we take – some of which have consequences for people’s livelihoods. We will support the review and look forward to its findings.

While this takes place, we have agreed to extend Higher Level Stewardship agreements on Dartmoor, asking for some moderate removal of sheep in the winter where this is needed to remove the risk of jeopardising the long-term recovery of the moorland habitats. The vast majority of SSSI commons will not be asked to reduce stock this year, although we have asked for some improved stock management such as shepherding and other positive management such as the cutting and maintenance of firebreaks.

Once the evidence review is complete, we will look to work together with all the farmers and stakeholders on Dartmoor to agree a way forward. This will look to ensure there is trust, collaboration and understanding between all the partners – so that commoners can have some certainty on how they can plan their business and



*Images: Natural England.*

they are properly rewarded for the contribution they are making to the recovery of the SSSI.



*Image: Natural England.*

There's a lot going on in and around Dartmoor for nature, and there is an increased focus on our National Parks being exemplars for nature as part of the Government's policy to ensure 30% of England is well managed for nature by 2030. We work in partnership with Devon Wildlife Trust in East Dartmoor on their

inspiring [Landscape Recovery Project](#), and with the Duchy of Cornwall who are looking to expand the precious [temperate rainforest habitats on their land](#) . We are also working in partnership with the South West Peatland partnership to restore peatland habitats across [Dartmoor](#).

In conclusion, while views are often polarised, if we are to see a future for Dartmoor's beautiful and unique habitats and the return of some of our iconic bird species, we will have to find a way to provide certainty and support to Dartmoor's farmers. We will need to listen to each other and find solutions that are practical and fair– it cannot be one or the other and it will take time.

**Tags:** [biodiversity](#), [Conservation](#), [Dartmoor](#), [farming](#), [Habitat](#), [Habitat conservation](#), [moor](#)

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Independent report

# Independent review of protected site management on Dartmoor

Updated 13 December 2023

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## Applies to England

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## Chairman's foreword

When I accepted the invitation to carry out this review, I knew that it would not be easy to come up with solutions to the problems set out in our terms of reference. Many of the challenges that Dartmoor faces are deep rooted and hard to resolve. However, the climate emergency and the alarming decline in biodiversity set out in the recent State of Nature report means that we can't afford to wait any longer. The way Dartmoor is managed needs to change radically and urgently to address these issues.

We believe that commoning and pastoralism have an important part to play in solving the problems that we face. Dartmoor needs to be grazed. At the same time, Hill farmers are facing some of the largest changes in support that they have seen in a generation and are fearful for their futures. Much of our review has therefore been devoted to considering how we can best equip them to meet the challenges that lie ahead. We need to create a framework to achieve the wide range of public benefits that Dartmoor is capable of providing in the twenty first century.

A key issue was to look at the governance of Dartmoor and encourage people to come together to produce a shared vision for the future and how to get there. Clearly this process involves commoners, Defra and Natural England, but also a wide range of other stakeholders with a vested interest in the future of Dartmoor: archaeologists, walkers, riders and conservationists to name but a few.

More than anything, the review has been about listening to peoples' insight and experience, mostly directly involving Dartmoor, but some interesting perspectives from elsewhere as well. Then, we challenged each other as panel members to find a way forward for this special place. The panel had a wide range of scientific and other expertise. Some had in-depth prior knowledge of Dartmoor and others less so. This balance, deliberately chosen, has proved to be invaluable. We were never going to find a silver bullet - a magic solution that has eluded others. We have tried to move the dial with a series of small changes whose cumulative impact will be helpful and make a difference. Crucially, our proposals involve people working together as equals, collectively.

We have focussed on land management and land use. We want to encourage the parties involved to start implementing our recommendations as soon as possible. In some instances, it will take some time to make the changes we are seeking, but that needs to happen as a deliberate choice rather than through inertia.

My panel have come together at very short notice and worked hard under pressure to provide great insights and challenge. They are still incredibly busy people and yet made the time to visit Dartmoor on a good number of occasions, some coming down from the North of England to do so. I am grateful to them

for their input and for the work of Simon Lunniss in providing the secretariat for our review.

## **Panel members**

Cicely Hunt - land agent and agricultural grants specialist, and member of the Independent Agricultural Appeals Panel for the Rural Payments Agency (RPA)

Dr Lisa Norton - agro-ecologist at the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, Lancaster Environment Centre

Jeremy Moody - Secretary of the Central Association of Agricultural Valuers (CAAV)

Professor Charles Tyler - Professor of Environmental Biology at the University of Exeter

Professor Jane K Hill - Professor of Ecology at the University of York

Professor Matt Lobley - Professor of Rural Resource Management and Director of the Centre for Rural Policy Research at the University of Exeter

Sue Everett - ecologist and land management adviser, chair of The Countryside Regeneration Trust

William Cockbain - Cumbrian hill farmer and former Chair of the National Farmers' Union (NFU) Uplands Panel

## **Chairman**

David Fursdon

December 2023

# **Section 1: Report purpose and structure**

## **1. Purpose**

1.1 This is the report of the independent review of protected site management on Dartmoor, carried out under the chairmanship of David Fursdon. It makes a series of recommendations for Defra ministers to consider on the future management of Dartmoor's sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs), designated under the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act, and the Dartmoor Special Area of Conservation (SAC), created under the Habitats Regulations.

1.2 As these sites have so far been managed almost exclusively through Agri-Environment Scheme agreements, we have considered the operation of these schemes on Dartmoor in some depth. We have sought to balance the objective of bringing protected sites into favourable environmental condition with providing a range of other priorities such as:

- agricultural production
- public access
- carbon capture
- fire risk
- water supply
- military use (including firing ranges)
- cultural and natural heritage

1.3 The [terms of reference for the review](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-protected-site-management-on-dartmoor-terms-of-reference) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-protected-site-management-on-dartmoor-terms-of-reference>) are available on GOV.UK. Ministers have asked us to look closely at the negotiations going on over the extension of current Higher-Level Stewardship (HLS) agreements and to recommend how the current impasse between Natural England and Dartmoor commoners can be resolved. This is a priority for immediate action.

## 2. Structure

2.1 This report is broken down into a number of sections:

- Section 1: the report, its purpose and structure
- Section 2: the review, background and methodology
- Section 3: context, introduction to Dartmoor and its agriculture, protected site legislation, the role of Dartmoor statutory bodies
- Section 4: panel findings, commentary and observations
- Section 5: conclusions and recommendations
- Appendices:
  - Appendix 1: Summary of recommendations
  - Appendix 2: list of organisations and individuals submitting written evidence to the review



## Section 2: The review

### 3. Background to the review

3.1 The Environmental Stewardship Scheme has closed to new entrants and many of the HLS agreements entered into by Dartmoor commons associations are coming to the end of their current terms. 23 such agreements are ending during 2023. Some of these agreements have already been extended at least once already, benefitting from the annual extensions permitted by the European Commission while the UK was subject to its jurisdiction.

3.2 As Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELM) are being introduced over a number of years in England, Defra ministers have decided to offer existing English HLS scheme members the opportunity to extend their agreements for up to 5 years. This will give them more time to consider future options for their businesses and to decide which routes to pursue under ELM.

3.3 To ensure value for money and comply with statutory obligations, extensions can only be offered where Natural England (NE) has confirmed that the agreements concerned are achieving their own objectives. On Dartmoor, NE concluded that the very low proportion of SSSI units in favourable condition meant it could not give those assurances and discharge its statutory responsibilities without the commons concerned agreeing to make further significant management changes and reductions in stocking rates.

3.4 While it is unclear whether and how clearly NE had already flagged its concerns over the condition of many SSSI units on Dartmoor, these changes undoubtedly came as a shock to the commoners. They responded angrily, with pre-existing tensions spilling over and their whole future participation in Agri-Environment Schemes being thrown into question. This culminated in local MPs sponsoring a Westminster Hall debate on the issue. Defra ministers asked David Fursdon to carry out this review.

3.5 To give the review time to report, the 5-year extension period was split into 2 separate periods of 1 year and 4 years (1 plus 4). For most agreements, limited or no change would be required in the first year of the extension. The recommendations from the review would inform the changes requested for the remaining 4 years. Commoners would then decide whether to continue in agreement, without affecting the payments received for the first year.

### 4. Methodology and evidence

4.1 This has been an evidence-led review. We have approached our task with open-minds and sought to engage with, and make ourselves available to, as many stakeholders and interested parties as possible. We have carried out numerous field visits, interviewed many individuals and organisations and received 155 written submissions. In doing this, we have been treated with unfailing good humour and courtesy and many people have gone considerably out of their way to help us. We particularly wish to record our thanks to all of the commoners we have met, to the Dartmoor National Park Authority (DPNA), the Dartmoor Commoners' Council (DCC), the Dartmoor Hill Farm Project and also to NE. This review has shone a spotlight on NE's role and activities, but its officers have been constructive and willing to answer our questions. We are grateful to them for their help.

4.2 This process has given us a lot of insight and information, but we do have to stress the lack of hard, empirical data in many areas. Sometimes this is because data was either not collected in the first place or is missing. Some of it is unreliable. So, for instance, we have been unable to determine the actual condition of SSSIs at the point at which they were designated and we have a very incomplete set of monitoring records for these sites. It has also proved impossible to establish, with any degree of certainty, the total number and breakdown of livestock grazing on the moor at any time.

4.3 In other instances, causal relationships and the impact of external environmental factors have yet to be fully understood. We do not yet know the full impact of climate changes that have already happened or are still to come. As a result of environmental pollution, Dartmoor now receives as much atmospheric nitrogen annually as some farmers use to fertilise their grass fields (between 25 and 40 kilograms per hectare (kg/ha)). This is likely to favour nitrogen responsive plants such as *Molinia* over other, less-responsive, plants. The effect of these and other factors are not yet fully quantified, but they will already be having a significant impact on what it is possible to achieve in terms of ecological management and species recovery.

4.4 The impact of pests and diseases is also hard to quantify. Heather and dwarf shrubs are attacked by the Heather Beetle and phytophthora. Dartmoor itself is an increasingly hostile environment for mammals (including in some cases humans) through a significant increase in tick-borne diseases such as Red-Water Fever and Louping Ill. Once stock have acclimatised and achieved resistance, it becomes difficult to move them off the moor without losing that environmental adaption.

4.5 In this rapidly changing environment, there is a clear risk that we may be striving to achieve historic targets for the management of protected sites that are already unattainable, while missing emerging opportunities to achieve new and stretching environmental benefits. We need to act urgently, but still be cautious in recommending irreversible responses to ecological changes that we don't yet fully understand.

## Section 3: Context

### 5. Geography and land use

5.1 Dartmoor's exposed location on an Atlantic peninsula, reaching 2,000 feet above sea level at its highest point, means that it has a cool, wet and windy climate. It is generally milder than similar but more northerly upland areas in the rest of England and has a longer grass growing season. Its granite geology means that much of its area has thin, acidic soil.

5.2 Dartmoor's high rainfall makes its hydrology especially significant. It has internationally important peat blanket bogs, valley mires and wet heathland. Peat is formed from vegetation decaying under waterlogged conditions and hosts an abundance of plants including sphagnum mosses, cotton grasses and sundews. Peat bogs are also home to threatened birds such as the most southerly breeding dunlin in Europe and support other wildlife such as dragonflies, frogs and beetles. They are capable of storing and locking up large quantities of carbon. However, the University of Exeter estimates that just 1% of Dartmoor's deep peat area is healthy, peat-forming bog, with the majority degraded by historic peat-cutting, drainage and erosion. In this state, blanket bogs are likely to be emitting rather than storing carbon. Expensive and time-consuming work is now going on to restore and re-wet Dartmoor's peat bogs by blocking erosion gullies, drainage channels and peat cuttings.

5.3 Most of Devon's rivers rise in Dartmoor's blanket bogs and feed 6 reservoirs and around 20 abstraction points, from which South West Water captures drinking water. Dartmoor is also criss-crossed by leats (man-made watercourses) managing and diverting the flow of water over it.

5.4 The Dartmoor National Park covers an area of 95,000 hectares (ha), roughly two-thirds the size of greater London. This includes 46,000ha of moorland and, within that, approximately 36,000ha of registered common land. 86% of the National Park is defined as utilizable agricultural area.

5.5 There are 92 separate registered commons on Dartmoor, mostly bordering the central high ground of the Forest of Dartmoor, which is the largest common on the moor at 11,200ha. Most of the commons have no physical boundaries so, without shepherding, animals can stray freely between them.

5.6 Between 30 and 35 % of Dartmoor's farmers are estimated to be tenants.

5.7 There are 54 commons owners on Dartmoor. The largest of these is the Duchy of Cornwall, which has owned the Forest of Dartmoor and some adjacent commons since 1332. Other owners include private individuals and families, the Dartmoor National Park Authority, the Ministry of Defence, Natural

England, the National Trust, other non-governmental organisations, and water and mining companies.

5.8 There are about 850 registered commoners, of whom it is estimated less than 20% are active graziers.

5.9 Dartmoor has the highest concentration of prehistoric archaeological sites in the UK and a wealth of medieval and industrial (mostly tin mining) archaeology. It has 1,100 scheduled ancient monuments and has what may be the largest surviving Bronze Age landscape in Europe.

5.10 Ministry of Defence training areas cover 13,000ha on Dartmoor. Live firing takes place over 8,900ha on up to 240 days of the year. Unexploded ordnance adds significant cost to the re-wetting of peatland.

5.11 The Scarborough Tourism Economic Assessment Model (STEAM) model used by all English national parks to estimate visitor numbers suggests that Dartmoor has 2.3 million visitors per year staying for more than 4 hours. Research carried out by the University of Exeter estimated 7 million visits of 1 day or less per year from the local area, projected to increase to 8 million by 2039 due to local population growth.

## 6. Agricultural history

6.1 A working knowledge of Dartmoor's past helps to understand its current position and how its ecology has changed and evolved in response to humankind's interventions.

6.2 For much of its history, Dartmoor was managed through pastoralism and summer-grazing transhumance. Animals and particularly cattle were taken on to Dartmoor to graze in summer and then returned to their home holdings to over-winter.

6.3 This was a carefully administered process, with property rights being set out in manorial records and the requisite fees being paid and recorded. Some farmers acquired grazing rights on their manorial home commons. Farmers in certain parishes had the right to move animals between their home commons and the central high ground of the Forest of Dartmoor (the 'Venville men'). Farmers from other parts of Devon – notably the South Hams – also had the right to bring animals up onto the moor. Agisters (herdsmen managing cattle for a fee) employed by Dartmoor landowners charged a fee per head for allowing animals to graze on the moor and tending to them while they were there.

6.4 The number of animals that a grazier could turn out on a common was determined by the capacity of their home holding to manage that stock through the winter (known legally as 'levancy and couchancy').

6.5 From the late nineteenth century onwards, this pattern of use began to break down under economic pressure from increasing international competition. The summer grazing of stock from other parts of Devon gradually stopped. Dartmoor-based farmers and landowners also started experimenting with the introduction of hardy sheep and cattle breeds able to stay out on the moor all year, loosening the relationship between the home holding (the inbye land) and the common grazing. Levancy and couchancy was effectively replaced by 'stinting', where the assessment of the common's grazing capacity was made independently from any consideration of the graziers' home holdings.

6.6 By the mid-twentieth century, the practice of leaving animals to graze on the moor over winter had become well established. Production methods were intensified in response to the demand for increased food production during and after the Second World War.

6.7 An attempt was made in the 1960s to address the increasingly out-dated legal basis of commons grazing in England and Wales through the passage of the 1965 Commons Registration Act and the subsequent work of the commons commissioners to register rights. This process was only partially successful on Dartmoor, with some commoners not registering their rights and others registering rights multiple times that were intended to allow the same animals to be grazed on different commons at different times in the year. The overall effect of this was the creation of more grazing rights than could reasonably be accommodated on Dartmoor's commons, removing a potential constraint on stocking numbers. We have seen figures showing that, on the Forest of Dartmoor, active graziers currently turn out stock equivalent to 22% of their rights. When the rights held by non-graziers are included as well, the utilisation figure drops to 12.5%.

6.8 After the UK's accession to the then European Economic Community, the operation of the Common Agricultural Policy became a further significant destabilising factor on Dartmoor. In particular, the introduction of headage payments for sheep (first the Ewe Premium and then the Sheep Annual Premium) and then for cattle (through the Suckler Cow Premium and more latterly the Beef Special Premium) encouraged increased stocking on Dartmoor's commons. This is now recognised by both farmers and environmentalists to have resulted in significant environmental and ecological damage. In a version of the 'tragedy of the commons', graziers responded rationally to the incentives they were being offered as individuals, but the overall impact on the commons was negative, with increased swaling (burning of vegetation to stimulate the growth of palatable grass) and high year-round stocking rates being maintained through environmentally damaging practices.

6.9 From the 1980s onwards, policymakers began to counter this trend towards intensification by offering farmers the opportunity to participate in agri-environmental (A-E) schemes. The Agriculture Act 1986 provided for the designation of Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs). Dartmoor was made an ESA in 1994 and most Dartmoor commons entered into ESA agreements, agreeing significant stocking reductions and the removal of over-wintered stock.

It has been reported to us that cattle and sheep numbers dropped by 50% across all commons.

6.10 The Agriculture Act 1986 also required ministers to have regard for socio-economic interests and the public enjoyment of the countryside. The requirement to balance the achievement of environmental goals with socio-economic, cultural and public enjoyment considerations has been a consistent feature of environmental legislation since that time. The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (the NERC Act 2006) provide that NE's general purpose includes 'contributing in other ways to social and economic well-being through management of the natural environment.' The National Park's socio-economic objectives and obligations are explained later in this report.

6.11 For most commoners, the ESA agreements were their first experience of entering into a formal collective agreement for the management of their commons. The governance required to balance the interests of commons owners, graziers and non-grazing rights holders proved challenging and has continued to do so for all A-E schemes. A number of people we have spoken to have referred to the difficulty of negotiating the distribution of the associated payments and the negative impact this had on the relationships between commoners.

6.12 In 2005, the Environmental Stewardship Regulations made under the Environment Act 1995 replaced ESAs with a new generation of EU-funded Environmental Stewardship agreements. Recognising their complexity and high environmental value, commons were directed towards Higher Level Stewardship (HLS), with Natural England Advisers providing individual support for the drawing up of 10-year agreements. These were introduced on Dartmoor with the negotiation of further significant reductions in stocking rates. It is the ending of these agreements, and the possibility of their extension with further significant stocking reductions as required by NE, which has provoked the current crisis in relations between commoners and regulator.

## **7. Current farming practices and economics**

7.1 Farming on Dartmoor continues to be based on pastoralism and livestock production, with moorland grazing on common land and newtakes (land enclosed from the surrounding moor in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) being supplemented to a varying extent by the use of better pastures on home farms and inbye land.

7.2 Three species grazing of cattle, sheep and ponies remains the norm on Dartmoor. Their different grazing habitats can complement each other well. Cattle prefer to eat longer grasses and use their tongues to pull and tear the vegetation. They graze to a height of 5 to 6cm and are generally better than

sheep at attacking problem vegetation and creating and maintaining structurally diverse grassland. Sheep have thin, mobile lips and move slowly over the sward nibbling the grass. They eat selectively when circumstances allow, biting off single leaves or shoots down to a height of 3cm. As well as grasses and herbs, sheep will also selectively eat some low scrub and their grazing of heather and dwarf shrubs can be a particular issue on Dartmoor. Horses and ponies have forward-facing teeth and can graze extremely close to the ground. They will preferentially select sweet grasses but will also eat a variety of sedges and rushes, bracken, scrub and tufted grasses.

7.3 For cattle, a lot of production systems on Dartmoor are based on producing store animals or breeding livestock, but we have seen finishing of fat animals as well. There are herds of Galloways and Belted Galloways (and some highland cattle) that stay out on the moor all year round, but there are also systems based on crossing stock with larger, more commercial, breeds and housing them over-winter. Some traditional breeds such as the Devon Red are also kept on this system. Both models can supply animals for conservation grazing, but a key issue is the calving pattern. Spring calving can be more economic and now predominates, but autumn calving suckler herds are invaluable for conservation grazing. They can be turned out to graze in the ecologically crucial period of late spring and early summer when the *Molinia* is at its most palatable.

7.4 For sheep, there are flocks of Scottish Black-Faced sheep and Herdwicks or Swaledales that live on the moor all year, with any available in-bye land being used for separately managed and distinct flocks of mule ewes (cross-bred sheep) and more commercial breeds. We have also seen more integrated systems that keep flocks on moorland grazing for part of the winter but bring the sheep in for lambing and flush them on inbye grazing to bring them into good condition before tuppung (breeding).

7.5 Pony keeping on Dartmoor is a highly traditional activity that generates revenue from the sale of foals. Some commoners keep non-pedigree hill ponies, while others specialise in breeding pedigree or true to type animals.

7.6 Farming on Dartmoor is economically extremely marginal. Defra publishes figures nationally for Farm Business Income in England (the amount which must provide a return for unpaid family labour and the farmer's own capital). In 2021 to 2022 Less-Favoured Area (LFA) grazing livestock farms benefitted from very high output prices (sheep prices were up by 25% on 2020 to 2021 and cattle prices by 12%), but the average direct agricultural income for these farms was still only £200 for the year. Income from agri-environmental activities was £12,300. The Basic Payments Scheme (BPS) contributed £26,500 and diversified income £3,900, giving a total average income of £42,900. For 2022 to 2023, recently published figures show a net loss of £10,400 from agricultural activities. BPS fell by just under a quarter from 2021 to 2022 to £19,700, diversified income was £3,300 and income from agri-environmental activities rose slightly to £12,900. Average total farm business income was £25,400, down 41% on 2021 to 2022.

**Table 1: Net farm business income for LFA grazing livestock farms**

| <b>Net Farm Business Income</b> | <b>2021/2022</b> | <b>2022/23</b>         |
|---------------------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| Agricultural net income         | +£200            | -£10,400               |
| Agri-environment Payments Gross | +£12,300         | +£12,900               |
| Basic Payment                   | +£26,400         | +£19,700               |
| Diversified/Other               | +£3,900          | +£3,300                |
| Total                           | +£42,900         | +£25,400<br>(see note) |

Note: Total figures do not add up due to rounding

Source: National statistics Farm Business Income by Cost Centre 2022 to 2023.

7.7 For Dartmoor specifically, we have also seen the 2021 results from a small survey carried out by the Duchy College Rural Business School, attempting to assess the year-round cost of commoning on Dartmoor. These figures (which included a cost for the farmer's own labour) showed an annual net loss of £348.90 per cow and £16.90 per ewe. Similar figures have been quoted by both commoners and NE. Mares made a small positive return of £24.70.

7.8 It would be fair to say that at present Dartmoor's farmers do not know how they are going to make up for the loss of BPS.

## **8. Statutory protection of environmentally valuable sites**

8.1 Together with a rich variety of wildlife, birds and insects, Dartmoor has sites containing a wealth of nationally and internationally important environmental features including:

- blanket bogs
- wet and dry heaths
- valley mires
- old sessile oak woodlands

8.2 The process of notifying (registering) and protecting such sites began in the UK with the passage of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act



1949. This allowed sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs) to be notified to local planning authorities.

8.3 The current statutory framework for notifying SSSIs is provided by sections 28 to 28S of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (WCA), as amended by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006. The WCA also sets out the role and responsibility for what is now NE to designate and manage SSSIs.

8.4 As amended, the WCA allows for directly negotiated management agreements on SSSIs. However, NE has used agri-environment agreements instead.

8.5 When the WCA came into force, a long process was gone through to review existing SSSIs and either de-notify or re-notify them, often with boundary changes. This means that the most longstanding SSSIs have gone through a convoluted notification process.

8.6 SSSIs can be notified for their biological or geological interest – Dartmoor has both – and they may be divided into separate management units. For biological SSSIs, NE will look at an area such as Dartmoor with particular landscape and ecological characteristics and notify a representative sample of the best examples of each significant habitat, although for rarer habitats all examples may be included. It may also select sites of particular significance for various taxonomic groups (for example birds, dragonflies, butterflies, reptiles, amphibians), with each group having its own set of selection guidelines. Geological SSSIs are selected using a more restricted process, with the intention of there being at least one example of each nationally important geological feature notified across Britain.

8.7 When land is to be designated as a SSSI, NE must notify all interested parties, including central government, local planning authorities, National Parks and all ‘owners and occupiers’ of the land concerned. The Countryside Rights of Way Act 2000 made it explicit that commoners with grazing rights were to be included as ‘occupiers’, but the previous lack of clarity means that notification of commoners has been inconsistent. Many commoners on Dartmoor were not notified when SSSIs were designated on their commons. There are conflicting legal opinions as to how significant this is for the application of the WCA on common land and particularly how commoners should be treated as ‘owners and occupiers’ for the application of the rest of the act.

8.8 As part of the notification process, NE must specify the flora, fauna, or geological or physiographical features which make the land of special interest and the operations NE believes are likely to damage that flora or fauna on those features. This gives rise to Operations requiring Natural England Consent (ORNEC), the list of operations that can only be carried out with permission from NE. These operations can only be carried out by the ‘owner or occupier’ of the land in a specified range of circumstances and will usually require NE consent (granted routinely as part of entering into an A-E

agreement). There is dispute over how this requirement should be applied to commoners. Any owner or occupier failing to obtain this consent, or anyone convicted of damaging or destroying any of the features of special interest of an SSSI, may be fined up to £20,000 in a Magistrate's Court, or an unlimited amount in the Crown Court.

8.9 NE assesses the condition of SSSIs sites, or units within them, with the target of carrying out such assessments at least every 6 years, although some have now been outstanding for more than 10 years. Condition is assessed against the following categories:

- favourable - habitats and features are in a healthy state and are being conserved by appropriate management
- unfavourable (recovering condition) - if current management measures are sustained the site will recover over time. We have found this to have been the default status for SSSIs at the point when they were brought under agreement
- unfavourable (no change) or unfavourable (declining condition) - special features are not being conserved or are being lost, so without appropriate management the site will never reach a favourable or recovering condition
- part destroyed or destroyed - there has been fundamental damage, where special features have been permanently lost and favourable condition cannot be achieved

8.10 There is also a separate but overlapping structure of European designations. The Single European Act 1987 gave the EU specific competence on environmental matters. The passage of the EU Habitats Directive 1992 led to the creation of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) as a network of environmentally important European sites. Together with the Special Protection Areas created under the Birds Directive, these are known as the European or Natura 2000 sites. The Directive is currently implemented in England through the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017, as amended by the Conservation of Habitats and Species (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019.

8.11 The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 require a Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA) to be undertaken for any actions impacting a SAC. Broadly, when an SSSI is also situated in a SAC, any operation requiring SSSI consent as an ORNEC will also require NE to carry out a HRA. This arguably offers a higher level of protection than SSSI designation alone, as decisions are made on a precautionary principle (so NE must not grant permission for an action unless it can be shown positively not to have negative consequences).

8.12 In this sense, SSSIs are the basic building block of all site-based nature conservation legislation in the UK and most other conservation designations are based upon them, including the high value National Nature Reserves (Dartmoor has 3 of these) and Ramsar sites.

8.13 Environmental protection is a high government priority. Commitments given at the Bern and Ramsar Conventions have been made legally binding. The UK also undertook at the COP15 UN Nature Summit to protect 30% of its land and sea by 2030. Legal targets to encourage environmental improvement and increase biodiversity are contained in the Environment Act 2021. The 2023 Defra Environment Improvement Plan set the target to bring 75% of English protected sites into favourable condition by 2042, with interim targets for 2028.

## 9. Notification of Dartmoor's protected sites

9.1 Dartmoor is currently notified as a SAC comprising 25,452ha. It also has 6 notified SSSIs, with the 2 categorisations overlapping to a very large extent.

**Table 2: Dartmoor SSSIs - number of units and year of notification**

| SSSI           | Units | Year of original notification | Total area (ha) |
|----------------|-------|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| North Dartmoor | 18    | 1989                          | 13,559.36       |
| South Dartmoor | 14    | 1989                          | 7,113.77        |
| East Dartmoor  | 22    | 1976                          | 2,111.36        |
| Dendles Wood   | 4     | 1965                          | 49.88           |
| Tor Royal Bog  | 2     | 1984                          | 59.18           |
| Wistman's Wood | 4     | 1985                          | 267.9           |

**Table 3: Dartmoor SSSIs - current condition assessment**

| SSSI           | Total area (ha) | Favourable area (ha) | Unfavourable area – recovering (ha) | Unfavourable area – no change (ha) | Unfa |
|----------------|-----------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------|
| North Dartmoor | 13,559.36       | 29.89                | 6,275.02                            | 7,254.45                           |      |
| South Dartmoor | 7,113.77        | 318.74               | 3,679.30                            | 1,589.61                           |      |

| SSSI                            | Total area (ha)  | Favourable area (ha) | Unfavourable area – recovering (ha) | Unfavourable area – no change (ha) | Unfa |
|---------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------|
| East Dartmoor                   | 2,111.36         | 845.17               | 992.31                              | 0                                  |      |
| Dendles Wood                    | 49.88            | 48.25                | 1.64                                | 0                                  |      |
| Tor Royal Bog                   | 59.18            | 24.48                | 34.69                               | 0                                  |      |
| Wistman's Wood                  | 267.9            | 267.9                | 0                                   | 0                                  |      |
| <b>Total area</b>               | <b>23,161.45</b> | <b>1,534.43</b>      | <b>10,982.96</b>                    | <b>8,844.06</b>                    |      |
| <b>Percentage of total area</b> | <b>100%</b>      | <b>6.62%</b>         | <b>47.42%</b>                       | <b>38.18%</b>                      |      |

9.2 62% of all common land in Dartmoor is SSSI. Many commons are only part designated, but the absence of any physical barriers between SSSI and non-SSSI areas means there is significant potential for sites to be damaged by stock straying from adjacent areas. This is considered explicitly by NE when carrying out a HRA under the SAC. For this reason, the influence of the protected site designation extends significantly beyond the area of the sites themselves.

9.3 Some of these SSSI notifications are now more than 50 years old. We have not been able to find condition assessments for those sites at the time of notification, nor any consistent record of condition monitoring over time. NE has confirmed to us that a significant number of sites were not in favourable condition at the time of notification and may never have achieved that status in the intervening period.

## 10. Other statutory bodies with an interest in Dartmoor

10.1 As well as NE, there are a number of other bodies whose statutory responsibilities need to be considered in any balanced assessment of providing public benefits on Dartmoor.

10.2 The Dartmoor National Park was established in 1951 under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 (as clarified and modified by the Environment Act 1995). Under this legislation, the National Park's core purposes are to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife, and cultural heritage of the areas specified (the National Park) and to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of those areas by the public.

10.3 The Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA) was also established under the framework of 1995 Environment Act to further the purposes of the National Park and to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities within it. The DNPA has submitted evidence to this review, amongst other things drawing attention to the legal duty of relevant authorities, including both NE and the Dartmoor Commoners' Council, to 'have regard to' the purposes of National Parks when carrying out their work. Such authorities should be able to demonstrate that they have fulfilled these duties and show how they have considered the purposes of these areas in their decision-making.

10.4 The DNPA also noted in its submission that National Park Authorities do not currently have a statutory or formal involvement with agri- environment schemes such as Countryside Stewardship, although such schemes are key to delivering National Park purposes. It referred to the conclusions of the Glover Review, including:

- protected landscapes (National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty -AONB) to have a central place in the environmental land management schemes
- National Park and AONB Management Plans to set a framework for all Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMs) payments within their landscapes
- over time, for National Parks and AONBs to take a leading role in creating bespoke schemes for some landscapes

10.5 The DNPA offered its statutory management plan, 'the Dartmoor Partnership Plan', as providing a strategic vision behind which stakeholders could unite to make progress on Dartmoor. It also summarised a number of important initiatives as examples of partnership working and empowering farmers to take responsibility for providing public benefits:

**Moorland Vision.** In 2005, the various statutory agencies engaged on Dartmoor had combined to produce an infographic giving a vision of what the moor should look like in 2030. This was intended to create a shared vision for the future of Dartmoor and help farmers understand their role in delivering it. The vision was for a grazed landscape, the largest open space in Southern England, with all of its varied habitats in optimum condition. Fourteen Premier Archaeological Landscapes (PALs) were also identified, where management of the archaeology would be prioritised, while remaining sympathetic to ecological interests. The vision was subsequently reviewed and updated to account for

additional elements such as access and resources including water and carbon storage.

**Dartmoor Farming Futures (DFF).** DFF grew out of the Moorland Vision as an experimental pilot project, taking a deliberately bottom-up approach to agri-environment scheme design. Farmers were engaged in the design, delivery and monitoring of the environmental outcomes, using the Moorland Vision to identify and design outcomes based on public goods found on their own commons. DFF showed what could be achieved by empowering land managers and has been referred to positively by many of the commoners to whom we have spoken. However, it relied on existing HLS agreements to deliver payments and eventually ran out of momentum as an option for both NE and the commoners.

10.6 Both DFF and the Moorland Vision have been through several rounds of evaluation to help inform the future A-E schemes. John Waldon produced the [Dartmoor Moorland Vision and Dartmoor Farming Futures evaluation](https://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/living-and-working/farming/farming-futures) (<https://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/living-and-working/farming/farming-futures>) for the DNPA, which has been a valuable reference source for us and is worthy of detailed study.

10.7 The Dartmoor Commoners' Council was created under the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985 as the outcome of a long-running debate over access, livestock welfare and abuses of commons rights on Dartmoor. The Council is a body elected and funded by the commoners. Its primary function is to maintain the commons within the National Park and to promote proper standards of livestock husbandry on them. In discharging this function, it must have regard for the 'conservation and enhancement' of the natural beauty of the commons including their SSSIs (to be construed as including the conservation of its flora, fauna, ecological, archaeological and geological and physiographical features). It must also protect the commons and render (give) assistance to any commoner in the maintenance of his rights of common. It also has powers to make regulations to prevent the overstocking of the commons. To discharge its functions the Council maintains two registers: the first of grazing rights held by those who do not intend to turn animals out to graze and the second a 'live register' of rights held by active graziers.

10.8 There are a range of other bodies with statutory obligations relating to the management of Dartmoor. We have received a submission from Historic England as the government's statutory advisor on the historic environment. This noted that, while legislation exists to prevent damage to historic monuments, the conservation of the historic environment is mostly incentive-based and done in collaboration with other government departments, principally Defra through A-E schemes. Historic England believes that, when HLS agreements were first set up on Dartmoor, they were robust on the need to deliver outcomes for the historic environment. However, it is much less confident that agreements have since been maintained by NE with that initial ambition in mind.

## Section 4: Commentary and findings

### 11. Overview

11.1 In our terms of reference, we were asked to identify examples of good practice that could be used more widely to achieve SSSI favourable condition. We have talked to many people on Dartmoor and also consulted with people on Exmoor (the Graze the Moor Project), Bodmin Moor, the Yorkshire Dales and the Cheviot Hills. We have not been able to find a legal template that can be applied universally to ensure good governance of commons, or a set of physical management techniques that will give good results in every situation. Transferable examples of good practice have also been hard to identify. Few if any Dartmoor commoners and commons associations are happy with their current situations.

11.2 However, there are plenty of examples of good collaborative projects and precedents for joined-up thinking going on across Dartmoor that could provide the basis of a strategy. Dartmoor also has young people who want to engage and develop their businesses.

11.3 From the submissions we have received, it is clear that Dartmoor generates strong emotions and opinions. Many people value it for its biodiversity and ecology, for others it is a gymnasium and a playground. For some it provides a much-needed opportunity to escape from the pressures of the modern world to recharge their mental and physical batteries. For its commoners and hill farmers, it is their workshop, a key element of their business plan and a core part of their cultural and family heritage.

11.4 It is also a highly contested landscape. We have received submissions expressing equally sincerely held but entirely opposing views, some of them accompanied by a degree of finger-pointing and blame attachment. We think this, together with some of the very high-profile public debate, is unhelpful. Dartmoor covers a big area and, with a degree of compromise and willingness to adapt, it should be possible to achieve an outcome that all can live with. It needs to function for the future as well as the past.

11.5 While some consider Dartmoor to be a wilderness, it is actually the product of thousands of years of men and women exercising their skill and ingenuity to make a livelihood from its apparently inhospitable environment. We believe that this active management will continue in the future. We do not believe that a positive outcome could be achieved by walking away and leaving Dartmoor to its own devices.

11.6 It is also not possible to turn the clock back to an era in the past and re-create what Dartmoor looked like then. We face a specific set of threats and

opportunities at this point in time. To identify and deliver the combination of public and private goods that Dartmoor is capable of producing in the twenty first century we need:

- careful data collection combined with good scientific analysis
- skilful management
- the building of genuine partnerships

## **12. Dartmoor's current vegetation and grazing management**

12.1 Dartmoor is not in a good state.

12.2 Its hydrology, crucial to the good condition of peat bogs, wet heathland and valley mires, is severely compromised as a result of historic peat cutting and drainage. The moor is drying out in many areas. Work by the University of Exeter has identified that Dartmoor has 31,500ha of peatlands, either blanket bog or valley mires, but only 350ha of functionally intact blanket bog. Work has begun to address this by the South West Peatland Partnership, although there is much more to do. We commend this example of collaborative working.

12.3 Leaving aside areas of woodland and some valley mires, very few of its SSSIs have been judged by NE to be in favourable condition.

12.4 *Molinia*, deciduous purple moor grass, is out-competing other vegetation and creating a tussocky, bleached, landscape where few animals will graze apart from a short period in late spring and early summer. Nitrogen deposition and under-grazing have contributed to the development of this monoculture, but the degradation of Dartmoor's peat bogs has also played a part. *Molinia* prefers faster draining soils to standing water and boggy ground. Accordingly, some we have spoken to have expressed confidence that re-wetting can solve this problem on its own (although not in all situations). Others support more interventionist strategies: mechanical flailing and mowing to open up paths into the *Molinia* and the use of salt licks and supplementary feeding to tempt cattle and ponies to graze the affected areas, with sheep then following on. Others support still more direct intervention with burning or the use of herbicides followed by re-seeding. We have interviewed Geoff Eyre, an agricultural engineer and specialist in moorland restoration, about his work to successfully develop such an approach.

12.5 In addition to the *Molinia*, gorse and bracken are encroaching on the utilizable area of the moor as the result of reduced grazing and less swaling.

12.6 The encroaching scrub and *Molinia* tussocks are making access to Dartmoor more difficult (including for commoners, adding cost and danger to



their operations), causing increased erosion as more people and animals are channelled onto the few clear paths. These also become run-off channels for rain.

12.7 There is also a build-up of flammable vegetation across the moor (the fuel-load) and an increasing risk of large-scale wild-fires. Some commentators are inclined to play this down, pointing to the absence of objective data about any increased risk. However, Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service and the commoners themselves believe they are sitting on a tinderbox. They are aware of the damage that could be done by a wildfire, including to valuable SSSIs.

12.8 Heather and dwarf shrubs are stunted and sparse. Different explanations are offered for this. Localised over-grazing by sheep plays a part. Some blame the Heather Beetle and viral diseases attacking bilberries and other dwarf shrubs. Others believe that more frequent burning is required to stimulate vigorous growth.

12.9 The question is, what to do about this and how to bring the SSSIs back into favourable condition? NE continues to put much faith in managing and often reducing grazing stock numbers, especially over-wintered sheep, but also cattle and ponies, particularly in the winter. It believes that in many cases further, radical, reductions in stocking numbers will be required to bring Dartmoor's protected sites back into favourable condition. In the current discussions on the extension of HLS agreements, it has also linked cattle and pony stocking rates in the negotiation of HLS extensions. It has suggested that the impact of each pony over-wintering on the moor (and there is no practical option to bring the animals in) should be offset by a reduction of two cattle grazing over the summer period. The commoners believe this is pitting cattle and pony keepers against each other and will lead to reductions in pony numbers.

12.10 NE local advisers have explained to us that, when the first round of HLS agreements was negotiated on Dartmoor, they would have liked to set lower stocking rates to conform with NE guidance on HLS moorland grazing rates. However, they were constrained from doing so by the need to secure take-up of agreements.

12.11 The commoners are adamant that the possible need for further stocking rate cuts was not explained to them when the HLS agreements were entered into. They view NE's current stance as reinforcing an already failed strategy. They have no confidence that it will achieve the required objective of bringing SSSI into favourable condition and bringing about the recovery of heather and dwarf shrubs. It also threatens to reduce stock numbers below the critical point where graziers will expend the time and resources needed to maintain animals out on the commons.

12.12 We have seen evidence that changing the balance of grazing and removing sheep may itself have unpredictable consequences in reducing

Dartmoor's biodiversity. This was well-illustrated by the work done on dung beetles by the Healthy Livestock Project (carried out by Clive Turner, with a group of active graziers from Holne Moor and Harford and Ugborough Commons Associations, working in partnership with the Dartmoor Hill Farm Project and Our Upland Commons).

12.13 There is no doubt that the reduction in stocking rates is causing significant livestock management problems for graziers. We have observed that an important part of learning, the learned instinct for flocks and herds to stay in a particular part of a common or area of open moorland, is for livestock to be held in place by other animals already grazing the contested areas. Once this competitive pressure is reduced, so the tendency to stray increases. Particularly, animals tend move in winter from the less palatable grazing areas of the central high ground to the less exposed borders of the moor. Sheep, especially, will search-out and graze heather and dwarf shrubs in preference to unpalatable *Molinia*.

12.14 How to keep animals in place on the open moorland is a key issue for the successful conservation grazing of Dartmoor. The impact of animals straying on to other commons and disrupting delivery of their agri-environment agreements is also problematic. The commoners we have spoken to believe that conventional shepherding can only play a very limited role in preventing this. They have also commented that reductions in the stock numbers that they can turn out on the commons have already reduced their incentive to devote time and energy to shepherding. No-fence collars are being used increasingly for cattle and knowledge is increasing about their role and limitations. Their use for sheep is also being investigated, although the cost-benefit analysis is different as sheep are lower value animals and kept in much larger numbers than cattle. Animal welfare can be a consideration if the collars are not used properly. Using them as a way of excluding stock from sensitive areas seems potentially useful.

12.15 The use of conventional fencing is controversial in an area such as Dartmoor. However, we wonder whether there should be a debate over its targeted use to protect vulnerable features until they are sufficiently mature and vigorous to withstand grazing.

12.16 The problem with vegetation management on Dartmoor is as much one of under-grazing as much as over-grazing and there is a danger of a vicious cycle developing. The area of *Molinia*, gorse and scrub expand because there are insufficient cattle and ponies to graze and trample them at critical times of the year (late spring and early summer). This encourages animals, and particularly sheep, to search-out heather and dwarf shrubs to graze in preference to the unpalatable *Molinia*. This in turn prompts further reductions in stocking rates as a policy response to the loss of heather. The *Molinia* expands again, triggering yet further stocking reductions. So, the cycle continues.

12.17 It does also need to be stressed how difficult it is to carry out mechanical operations on Dartmoor. It covers a huge area and many parts are extremely

inaccessible. Its terrain is uneven, boggy and strewn with granite boulders able to wreck even the sturdiest equipment. One of the unique attributes of the commoners is their familiarity with this environment and ability to work in it and move across it.

## **13. Natural England's engagement on Dartmoor**

13.1 Dartmoor is a very challenging environment for NE to work in. Challenging because of its fragile and damaged landscape, with a wide range of almost uniquely valuable habitats, plants and species. Even more challenging because of the wide range of vested interests at play on the moor. Most challenging of all because of its strong-minded and combative farming community.

13.2 However, NE has not responded successfully to this challenge. We are concerned that, even now, it may not appreciate how completely its relationship with commoners has broken down on Dartmoor.

13.3 A key issue is the lack of dedicated resource NE has been able to deploy on the moor. Until recently there have been one and a half advisers managing the protected sites and the agri-environment agreements on Dartmoor and some other areas (reduced from over a dozen at one stage). This was insufficient to maintain relationships, provide a reasonable level of support and advice to agreement holders and, ultimately, to achieve NE's statutory environmental objectives. We understand this resource has recently been increased.

13.4 NE's local advisers have responded to this situation by becoming increasingly inward-looking and target driven, rather than by reaching out and building effective partnerships. Personal contact has significantly reduced and commoners have unanimously expressed the view to us that trust and communication have broken down.

13.5 However, most communications have to be channelled through commons association administrators to reach the individual graziers, with some inevitable loss of detail and explanation along the way. This poses real challenges for both the administrators and NE.

13.6 This created a difficult background against which for NE to introduce this latest round of changes to HLS agreements. However, the organisation doesn't appear to have anticipated, or been prepared for, the strong negative reaction it has encountered.

13.7 It will take time and a large amount of effort for NE to rebuild trust and respect on Dartmoor. It will only be able to do so by working closely and openly with the commoners and by building effective partnerships with other key stakeholder organisations.

13.8 However, this would not be a balanced narrative if we did not observe that at times commoners' frustrations have led to NE advisers being subjected to unacceptable abuse and hostility. This is not excusable under any circumstances.

## 14. Commoners attitudes

14.1 Dartmoor's hill farmers are tough, resilient and stubborn, with a deep sense of their culture and heritage. They are also fated to work collaboratively with each other, sometimes the same families over generations, because of the commoning system and the practicalities of livestock farming on Dartmoor's open moorland.

14.2 The progressive removal of BPS and the introduction of ELM poses real challenges for all LFA farm businesses. The Farm Business Income figures quoted in paragraph 7.6 illustrate why Dartmoor farmers are concerned and uncertain about their future at this time.

14.3 Their deep knowledge of Dartmoor and skillset should make them almost uniquely well equipped to deliver the range of public benefits that is now being demanded from Dartmoor. However, society's expectations are increasing and growing ever more complicated. Dartmoor's farmers need to understand the social contract they are being offered and feel confident that it offers a viable future for them and their families. They will need to be adaptable to meet challenging agri-environmental targets.

14.4 NE's demand for some reductions in stocking rates as a pre-condition for the extension of HLS agreements has struck a particularly raw nerve. Many graziers believe they are in danger of being forced off their commons altogether and are determined to resist this. Livestock are a key part of Dartmoor farmers' identities as graziers and pastoralists. They are proud of their stock and of their skills in managing them. Leared herds and flocks that are resistant to Dartmoor's disease pressures are a valued asset and passed down from one generation to the next. For tenant farmers, livestock are their main capital asset and a useful way to pass on assets to their successors.

14.5 There is a real danger of a stand-off developing at this point with NE's statutory powers being tested legally against the commoners' property rights as graziers. This would be wasteful, counter-productive and damaging.

14.6 It should also be un-necessary. The submissions we have received (including from NE itself) recognise the important role that grazing should play in the management of Dartmoor. It should therefore be possible to design a scheme, or schemes, that:

- protects Dartmoor's SSSIs and SAC

- has the support and confidence of Dartmoor's key stakeholders
- rewards commoners fairly for delivering a balanced package of public benefits

14.7 A number of submissions have pointed to the limited contribution that production from Dartmoor makes towards the nation's overall food supply and calorific requirement. They suggest that Dartmoor's farmers must accept that their primary role is to be conservation graziers and park keepers. We don't believe they need to make this choice. Animals from Dartmoor hill farms will continue to play an important part in the livestock supply chain, producing pedigree or store cattle and ewes to be sold for further crossing with more productive but less hardy breeds (the stratified sheep production system). Animals will also continue to be produced directly for the food chain and how best to add value to this process is one of the key challenges facing Dartmoor's farmers.

14.8 However, there is no reason why this traditional role can't be combined with carrying out conservation grazing and stewarding Dartmoor to a high, professional, standard. In future, A-E schemes will pay for achieving challenging environmental outcomes and providing other public benefits. Farmers everywhere are recognising that their businesses will have to alter significantly to benefit from this. Dartmoor's farmers are no exception, but this challenge offers opportunities as well as threats.

## 15. Other statutory bodies

15.1 Most of the statutory bodies that we spoke to (other than NE) expressed concern at the way HLS has become focused almost solely on the delivery of the Habitats Regulations and SSSI favourable condition. A-E schemes must be able to do this while also taking account of other statutory obligations. They must be capable of delivering a wide range of environmental and socio-economic objectives. NE also must be more open and collaborative in the way it engages with the other statutory bodies active on Dartmoor.

15.2 In terms of the statutory bodies themselves, we commend much of the work that has gone on under the leadership of the DNPA. Projects like the Moorland Vision and DFF have laid the foundations for what needs to happen next on Dartmoor. If Dartmoor's stakeholders and commoning community could come together to revive and deliver those initiatives, the effect would be transformative. It could also provide invaluable learning for other English upland areas. We are clear that DNPA has a crucial leadership and facilitation role to play.

15.3 The other statutory body with a key role to play on Dartmoor is the Dartmoor Commoners' Council. This has a broad range of legal powers to carry

out its functions and it is well served by its officers, who work hard to further the interests of Dartmoor's commoners. It is also mostly well-supported by the commoning community, who value it as a democratically elected forum in which they can debate issues and as a body which represents their views. However, a significant number of engaged and well-informed commoners believe that Dartmoor needs a further body to take on many of the functions that are currently the responsibility of the council.

15.4 To a significant extent, this view reflects frustration at the slow pace at which the council is able to make progress at times and the extent to which it gets bogged-down in revisiting the same issues multiple times. This, in part, is an inevitable consequence of Dartmoor's small and closely knit community and the difficult nature of some of the issues that the Council considers. However, it also reflects the inherent tension from the council being both a democratic discussion forum and a statutory enforcement body. We will make recommendations about the future role of the council in our conclusions.

15.5 Other statutory bodies, including both Historic England and the Rural Payments Agency (RPA), should look to play a higher profile and more proactive role in the management of A-E agreements on Dartmoor.

## **16. Protected site legislation and management**

16.1 When we began this review, our starting point was to look at Dartmoor's protected sites to understand the extent of their legal protection, their current condition and, crucially, whether this is improving or declining. We were surprised how difficult it was to find and analyse this information.

16.2 While the main designations are reasonably generic, sites have been notified in different places for different features and information on their condition is difficult to pull together. NE has done its best to present this information on GOV.UK, but we are not surprised that the commoners find it hard to access and understand. This matters because understanding is the first vital step towards successful implementation.

16.3 Without the results of any consistent monitoring, it is impossible to know whether SSSIs were in favourable condition when they were notified, if they have achieved that status at any time since and what the trend is now. We suspect that many of the SSSI units have been in poor condition for a long time, so we are dealing with a chronic problem rather than something that has arisen recently.

16.4 We also note the almost universal feedback from commoners that they don't believe NE staff currently have the time and resource to carry out SSSI condition assessment rigorously. They believe NE is, at best, making flying visits to SSSI commons and making fairly cursory judgements of their condition.

16.5 The scientists on our panel also point out that condition assessment monitoring is intended to be a rapid appraisal tool. They believe there is a need for proper data capture with suitable baselines and scientific evaluation to go on alongside this. Further experimentation is needed to arrive at a fully informed view of what is happening to Dartmoor's SSSIs.

## **17. A-E schemes**

17.1 Some years ago, the funds that NE used to reward farmers for managing SSSIs were merged into A-E schemes. On Dartmoor the two have become almost completely entwined and the objectives of HLS are focused primarily on achieving favourable SSSI condition. A-E schemes will play an increasing role in the delivery of government policy in the future, including on SSSI condition, and be used to deliver a wider range of public benefits. The relationship between the two policy strands (protected site management and A-E schemes) will therefore need to be disentangled and made more explicit.

17.2 The principles of Dartmoor Farming Futures should be considered as part of the development of A-E schemes. People need to be taken into partnership and allowed to play a far more active and responsible role in agreeing what needs to be done and in monitoring outcomes. This gives them ownership and responsibility, making them active stakeholders rather than passively following orders. It should also be to the benefit of NE. In the long term, better outcomes can be achieved, and scarce resources used to better effect, by working through others.

17.3 From what we have observed on Dartmoor, commons associations, and the few exceptional individuals who run them, are already over-stretched in meeting their existing obligations. Their capacity could easily become the limiting factor in delivering ELMS on common land. We understand why schemes relying on the collective delivery of outcomes are administered as they are, but policymakers will have to find ways to support commons associations meet their obligations and think laterally about the delivery of policy outcomes.

## **Section 5: Recommendations and conclusions**

## **18. Vision and governance**

18.1 Dartmoor cannot either stand still or retreat into its past. More than anything, it needs a Dartmoor-wide, landscape level, vision, supported by a clear delivery strategy. This will give its stakeholders a rallying point and a clear sense of direction.

18.2 We believe that the DNPA Partnership Plan provides such a vision and should be fully supported by Dartmoor's commoners and stakeholders.

18.3 We further recommend that Dartmoor's governance should be reinforced by the creation of a Land-Use Management Group, focusing particularly on protected areas (SAC and SSSIs) and surrounding land. This should be independently chaired and have both key stakeholder organisations and commoners' representatives in membership. Relevant government agencies and arm's length bodies (ALBs) (including NE) should also be represented and be fully committed to the success of the group.

18.4 The group should sit outside the governance structure of the National Park to avoid any potential conflict of interests over planning issues. It should work transparently and openly, creating a neutral space within which relationships between NE and commoners can be repaired and other interests discussed. It should facilitate the development of a plan to improve SSSI condition and deliver government targets on Dartmoor. The group will also need to develop a close working relationship with the emerging Landscape Recovery Groups.

18.5 The group should also be tasked with developing a Multi-Functional Land Use Framework for Dartmoor and creating a land-use plan, building upon the foundation of the Moorland Vision. There has been much discussion and several national reports recently about using Land Use Frameworks to make sense of, and aid decision-making on, the multi-functional use of land as the various demands made of it increase. Dartmoor, with its multiple stakeholders, would be a good test bed to develop these ideas further.

18.6 The group should also be responsible for identifying areas where Dartmoor-specific base-lined data needs to be collected, or where trials, research and experimentation are required (for instance into tickborne diseases, heather beetle, nitrogen deposition, heather restoration and exploring the links between vegetation and wider biodiversity). The output from this process should be fed into both the development of protected site management strategies and A-E scheme prescriptions. A publicly available central library of site monitoring data should be created, potentially to be managed by the National Park.

18.7 We have seen examples of successful heather moorland restoration in Yorkshire. We are not clear if the techniques are suitable, appropriate or viable on Dartmoor, but it is an example of the sort of research project that could be supervised by this group.



## 19. Protected site management

19.1 Having looked at the situation on Dartmoor, we believe that the complicated and multi-layered legal structure of protected sites should be simplified, but without being diluted or made less rigorous. We believe that some of the ideas contained in the Defra green paper of March 2022: '[Nature recovery green paper: protected sites and species](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/nature-recovery-green-paper)' (<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/nature-recovery-green-paper>) are worthy of serious consideration. Management prescriptions for sites need to be clearer and easier to understand by those tasked with their care. The results of site monitoring must be made more transparent. For instance, classifying a site automatically as 'unfavourable, recovering' because it has been entered into an A-E scheme is misleading.

19.2 The concept of SSSIs should be revisited to ensure that they are compatible with and, can contribute towards, a vision to be delivered at a landscape or eco-system level. They need to be compatible with the concept of a landscape delivering a 'mosaic' of public benefits. The list of features that could result in notification should also be reviewed and potentially extended.

19.3 For Dartmoor's SSSIs, particularly, more scientific monitoring and evaluation is required to assess their condition and to understand the influences impacting on them.

19.4 The notification of Dartmoor's SSSIs needs 'refreshing', to ensure that the features which led to the original designation notification are still relevant after a considerable period and if there are additional features now requiring protection.

19.5 The present uncertainty over the legal position of commoners being treated as 'owners and occupiers' and subject to ORNEC for the purposes of the WCA needs to be resolved as soon as possible. The possibility of owners, tenants and commoners being treated differently with regard to the enforcement of SSSI requirements is creating unwanted additional tension between these parties.

## 20. Land-use, ecology and biodiversity

20.1 The absolute top priority for Dartmoor is improving its hydrology and re-wetting its blanket bogs. We understand that there is currently no guaranteed funding for this work beyond 2025. It is high cost (although this could fall as local expertise develops), but crucial to address climate change. We believe that there is a good case to be made for continued public funding. Sources of private finance also need to be investigated, as does charitable funding. A traded market in carbon-offsetting is still being developed but must be a

potential source of funding in the future. Dartmoor's use as a military firing-range adds significantly to the cost of re-wetting because of the need to check for and safely dispose of un-exploded ordnance. The Ministry of Defence should make a significant contribution to the cost of re-wetting according to the 'polluter pays' principle.

20.2 The relationship between re-wetting, achieving protected site favourable condition and HLS roll-overs (and other A-E schemes) also needs to be understood. Keeping commoners fully engaged in the re-wetting process is essential but, if the required capital investment is not forthcoming, they will not be able to meet targets to achieve SSSI favourable condition on those sites. The impact on their farm businesses will also need to be considered.

20.3 The second priority should be controlling *Molinia* through a combination of active management practices as set out in this report. This should be supported by Dartmoor-specific research into its growing habit and control, including grazing.

20.4 We note the work going on to extend Wistman's Wood. We believe there is potential to encourage the development of wood pasture and the growth of more trees generally on Dartmoor, particularly along indented valleys and gullies. This should be done as part of an agreed land use plan.

20.5 Restoring populations of heather and dwarf shrubs, especially bilberry, will make an important contribution towards improving Dartmoor's biodiversity and creating habitats. Over-grazing of heather and other dwarf shrubs means that they often only survive at the pioneer (early growth) stage. More research and monitoring are needed to understand the full range of environmental influences at work. We see heather restoration as part of a holistic approach to Dartmoor's recovery. Reducing *Molinia* and increasing the area of palatable grass on the moor will directly reduce the grazing pressure on these ecologically important plants.

20.6 Local initiatives to promote and restore biodiversity should be supported and encouraged, for instance the work being done to support Marsh Fritillary butterflies and the reintroduction of curlews.

## **21. Future of A-E schemes on Dartmoor**

21.1 A-E schemes must deliver tangible benefits for nature. They should also be flexible, last long enough to provide a degree of certainty for business planning and provide sufficient reward to attract commoners into membership.

21.2 The relationship between A-E scheme prescriptions and the management of protected sites must be made more transparent and an agreed balance struck between the achievement of different objectives in future. On Dartmoor,

for the current generation of HLS agreements, achievement of protected site favourable condition has come to overshadow other objectives and considerations of scheme delivery.

21.3 Dartmoor needs a single A-E scheme covering the whole moor to lead and encourage strategic improvement (a whole of Dartmoor approach), or at the very least a small number of closely integrated and co-ordinated strategic schemes. We welcome the fact that a number of Dartmoor schemes have been accepted for the second round of Landscape Recovery. This is a good example of collaborative working and helpful to building understanding of how Landscape Recovery will work on Dartmoor. Strategic-level schemes can take some of the strain off schemes delivered through commons associations. Commoners should have the option to belong to both a local scheme on their common and to a Dartmoor-wide scheme. The possibility of introducing a Dartmoor-wide grazing scheme should be considered (like the [Verderers' Grazing Scheme in the New Forest \(https://www.verderers.org.uk/grazing-scheme/\)](https://www.verderers.org.uk/grazing-scheme/)). Stock could be entered directly into such a scheme. Health status and shepherding to avoid straying would be 2 possible criteria for such a scheme. The payment would have to be sufficient to reward the work involved.

21.4 Dartmoor Farming Futures is a good example of what can be achieved through partnership and empowerment. We believe that future schemes should engage farmers in helping to design, police and evaluate success. It might involve payment by results. We are aware of the Test and Trials work that looks at this. We have had positive reactions to this from commoners, particularly if it combines a base payment with some form of results-based reward. Our aim should be to reward entrepreneurial behaviour and innovation.

21.5 To succeed, Dartmoor's hill farmers and commoners will need to commit to this new way of working.

21.6 We have heard a lot about the potential environmental benefits of encouraging the re-integration of farming operations between the home holding and common land. Where farmers have A-E agreements on their home holdings, there should be options to reward those who demonstrate they have the required degree of integrated management of livestock and grazing between inbye land and open moorland.

21.7 We need to encourage risk-taking, experimentation and innovation to deliver good environmental outcomes and the associated public benefits. There needs to be a 'safe space' to do this. At the moment, the consequences in terms of loss of payments are still too severe to risk. The commoning governance structure also doesn't encourage risk-taking. People are very aware that they are gambling with others' money and of the need to exercise prudence.

21.8 The capacity of commons associations to administer A-E agreements needs to be increased and the associations helped to become more resilient.

21.9 There should be an initiative to develop the next generation of commons leaders on Dartmoor. This could be run by DNPA or the Dartmoor Hill Farming Partnership. Existing practitioners should be encouraged to participate to run sessions based on their personal experience and 'on the job' learning.

21.10 Knowledge transfer and the ability to exchange ideas on good practice is important. While carrying out this review, we have noted how much commoners have appreciated the opportunity to come together and discuss shared issues.

21.11 The possibility of creating a central resource on Dartmoor giving access to advice on governance and legal issues and to facilitation and mediation services should be examined. This could be run from either DNPA or DCC and potentially be paid for by commons associations out of scheme payments.

21.12 Some of the pressure over the distribution of scheme payments for CS agreements could be reduced by introducing set (hypothecated) prescription payments for individual actions. For example, if someone undertook to maintain a herd of autumn calving Galloways to undertake conservation grazing, the payment they would receive would be set centrally. This could also begin to address the issue of non-graziers receiving scheme payments, an issue on which we have received a lot of comments.

21.13 Commoners' associations and individual farmers should be encouraged to take appropriate professional advice as and when this will add value. (We have heard that less professional advice is used on Dartmoor than on Northern commons.)

## **22. Communication**

22.1 Defra and its ALBs should find ways to improve communications with individual commoners on Dartmoor. This should include both high-level messaging and providing technical information relating to SSSI management and A-E schemes. At the moment we are placing undue reliance on commons associations to act as this conduit. This route can be erratic and is under pressure. Digital communication through Gov.UK is not providing a full answer at present.

## **23. Grazing and vegetation management**

23.1 Dartmoor needs more cattle to carry out conservation grazing, particularly of Molinia and land recovered from Molinia. A-E schemes should encourage farmers to maintain herds of cattle for this purpose, with a premium for having animals available to graze in the late spring and early summer. It must be

considered in option design and payments that, even if the targeted grazing is required for only a short part of the year, the stock require year-round management. Farmers also need to have a reasonable degree of certainty about the duration of support before they make the considerable investment required to maintain a suckler herd.

23.2 Dartmoor's pony population is invaluable for conservation grazing and genetically important. We have seen industry estimates of a target population of between 1,000 and 2,500 head. Ponies and cattle should not be linked for the calculation of stocking rates and NE should not take actions likely to result in a reduction in their numbers.

23.3 Sheep are an important part of Dartmoor's hill farming system. They contribute to the moor's biodiversity and its cultural heritage. Maintaining 3 species grazing should be a key part of the vision for the future of Dartmoor. We believe that a holistic strategy should be implemented to increase the grazeable area of the moor and reduce the amount of *Molinia* and gorse. This will increase the palatable area available for grazing by sheep and therefore reduce the amount of localised over-grazing of heather and dwarf shrubs.

23.4 The 2 plus 3 (or 3 plus 2) standstill period we have proposed for HLS extensions will give sheep keepers the opportunity to demonstrate that they can shepherd their flocks to protect vulnerable heather and dwarf shrubs. If this isn't successful, we recognise that there will be pressure to remove sheep from parts of the moor for at least some of the winter. This could coincide with tupping and lambing. NE has a statutory duty to act where a SSSI or a part of the SAC is being damaged by over-grazing.

23.5 A service matching those offering off-wintering of sheep flocks with potential purchasers of that service could be considered to help manage sheep removal. Equally, support in providing more sheep accommodation on home farms may be required. However, the potential loss of disease resistance and learning must be acknowledged as an issue with both of these options.

23.6 Livestock straying is widespread and a major problem on Dartmoor. We have suggested that the introduction of a Dartmoor-wide grazing scheme could go some way to addressing this. This could be supported by the employment of agisters or reeves to intervene where persistent problems are occurring. We do know, however, that this suggestion has been debated at length by the Dartmoor Commoners' Council and defer to their knowledge in this area.

23.7 The future role of swaling needs to be fully debated. Its use on deep peat is already, correctly, closely regulated and controlled. However, there are many other situations in which it could play a useful role. We understand the environmental concerns about its use, but carefully judged and limited use of the technique may bring benefits that can't practically be delivered in any other way.

23.8 Leading on from this, wild-fire control and prevention needs to be afforded a high priority on Dartmoor. We note the work that the Dartmoor Commoners' Council is already doing to co-ordinate this and the excellent work by Ian Donovan of the Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service to raise the profile of this issue and build delivery partnerships. The commoners already play a central role in this and precedent from other parts of the world tells us they are a crucial resource to help manage this risk.

## **24. Roll-over of HLS agreements**

24.1 Some commons agreements are already reaching the end of the first year of the 1 plus 4 HLS roll-over formulation. There will therefore not be enough time to conclude negotiations for the following 4 years and still give commoners enough opportunity to make any required adjustments to their operations. We should therefore move to a 2 plus 3 default arrangement or consider 3 plus 2 (accepting that a small number of commons have already agreed 5-year terms).

24.2 The negotiation of extensions beyond the first 2 (or 3) year period should be managed jointly by Defra, NE, RPA and Historic England.

24.3 The first discussion of the options going forward should take place with representatives of all the affected commons associations. Bilateral discussions between NE and individual commons associations can follow. This would help foster open and transparent communications and avoid potential misunderstandings.

24.4 If there was a real risk of irreparable and unacceptable damage to a SSSI or the SAC, then NE should discuss this in the Land-Use Working Group before reaching a conclusion on appropriate remedial action.

24.5 The aim of the discussions should be to explore future options for affected commons as well as considering terms for an HLS roll-over. This should help to create a timeline and a profile for Dartmoor's commons to move to new schemes, helping to achieve an orderly and well-managed transition.

## **25. Recommendations for NE's future operations on Dartmoor**

25.1 NE needs to recognise the scale of the challenge it faces to rebuild trust and confidence on Dartmoor. Significantly increased staffing resource will be

required if this is to be achieved. NE must engage positively with the Land-Use Management Group.

25.2 There will also need to be a complete change of approach to NE's engagement on Dartmoor. Openness and the creation of partnerships are the key to successful delivery. Protocols will need to be established for visits and inspections. There should be a dedicated and senior communications lead, at least as an interim measure.

25.3 NE will also need to consider how the SSSI condition monitoring can be made more transparent and fit for purpose.

## **26. Other Dartmoor institutional recommendations**

26.1 The Dartmoor Commoners' Council plays an invaluable role in the management of Dartmoor and must continue to do so. However, its current structure and operation should be reviewed to identify ways of reinforcing its effectiveness.

One option should be to:

- retain the present council to give strategic oversight and provide a forum in which commoners can debate issues of concern
- delegate its enforcement and operational activities to a smaller group with strengthened independent input.

Its working relationship with the Land-Use Management Group will also need to be developed.

## **27. Final comments**

27.1 This report is the result of an intense period of work between August and December 2023. We present its conclusions to you and hope that it will contribute to the debate over the future of Dartmoor, something about which everyone we have spoken to cares very deeply.

# **Appendix 1: Summary of recommendations**

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Policy paper

# Government response to the Independent review of protected site management on Dartmoor: full report

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Conservative government**

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# Ministerial foreword

Since joining Defra I have listened to and learnt from farmers, including those in Dartmoor. I recently visited the area and met with those farming on the common, tenant farmers and stakeholders, seeing first hand the breathtaking landscape.

I have heard and seen first hand the rich Dartmoor wildlife and plant life. It is imperative that we preserve the cultural heritage in the area for future generations and it will be a key step towards achieving our environmental targets.

Dartmoor has a set of unique challenges, and the review provides us with a better understanding of how we can work with farmers to deliver on agricultural production and environmental improvements, public access and cultural and natural heritage. I would like to thank David Fursdon and the Review Panel for their work.

For everyone who lives on or enjoys Dartmoor, to continue to do so we need farming on Dartmoor to achieve its aims, it needs healthy and varied habitats working in harmony with food production and we will continue to support those working in the area to do what they do best; produce food hand in hand with preserving the diversity and abundance of nature.

With this response we are setting out the action the government is taking on the recommendations; progress to date with implementing certain recommendations; and further actions it will take to implement the Review.

We will:

- work with Natural England to repair relationships with Dartmoor's commoners and stakeholders and ensure government is collaborative moving forward
- provide farmers and land managers confidence in government policies, so they can make the most of Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes
- support robust strategy and governance for Dartmoor

Today's response builds on the considerable progress that we have made since the Review was published in December 2023.

In January we set out the biggest upgrade to farming schemes since the UK has had the freedom to design our own schemes. We announced a new and improved moorland offer which includes 5 new actions, which will more comprehensively and fairly reward the actions taken in moorland settings.

For example, one new action, low grazing on moorland, pays farmers to maintain low livestock density on moorland which aims to support and enhance moorland habitat alongside farming.

We also announced funded Animal Health and Welfare grants for up to £2,000 a year for farmers who keep both sheep and cattle. This will help farmers lower costs and have healthier and more productive animals on their farms. Producing high quality livestock for sale, as part of increasingly sustainably managed landscapes should continue to be the foundation of Dartmoor farm businesses.

We know this is a period of transition and that in the interim before our full environmental land management is on offer we need to have support in place. This is why we have undertaken rapid work to extend all higher-level stewardship agreements in Dartmoor by one year. This will allow agreement holders to plan and adapt to any future changes to management.

To help in this period we also have committed to set up a Land Use Management Group (LUMG) which will act as a forum to build strong relationships between farmers, landowners and commoners, and enhance open decision making with effective governance.

All of this, plus the further steps we are taking, detailed in our full response, illustrates our continued commitment to backing British farmers. Change on this scale does not happen overnight and I will continue action in areas where it matters and support farm businesses to grow and thrive.



The Rt Hon Steve Barclay MP

Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs

# Introduction

This document sets out the government's response to the [Independent Review of Protected Site Management on Dartmoor](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-protected-site-management-on-dartmoor/independent-review-of-protected-site-management-on-dartmoor).

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-protected-site-management-on-dartmoor/independent-review-of-protected-site-management-on-dartmoor>)

Dartmoor is one of England's most loved landscapes, with wide open moorland framed by steep woodland valleys and rolling hills of pastoral moorland. It is a landscape people are drawn to, to immerse themselves in nature and history. Dartmoor is the result of generations of farmers working together with the natural landscape, to create a truly special place.

Protecting Dartmoor's plants, wildlife and cultural heritage for future generations will be a key step towards achieving our environmental targets. For farming on Dartmoor to achieve its aims, it needs healthy and varied habitats working in harmony with food production.

Through our farming reforms, the government aims to:

- maintain domestic food production
- [improve farm productivity \(https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/farming-investment-fund-fif\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/farming-investment-fund-fif) so that all farm businesses, and the sector, can thrive
- deliver ambitious outcomes for the environment, heritage and climate, as set out in the [Environmental Improvement Plan \(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-improvement-plan\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-improvement-plan) and [Plan for Water \(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/plan-for-water-our-integrated-plan-for-delivering-clean-and-plentiful-water/plan-for-water-our-integrated-plan-for-delivering-clean-and-plentiful-water\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/plan-for-water-our-integrated-plan-for-delivering-clean-and-plentiful-water/plan-for-water-our-integrated-plan-for-delivering-clean-and-plentiful-water)
- reduce agricultural greenhouse gas emissions, as set out in the [Net Zero Growth Plan \(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/powering-up-britain\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/powering-up-britain)
- [improve the health and welfare of livestock \(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/animal-health-and-welfare-pathway/animal-health-and-welfare-pathway\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/animal-health-and-welfare-pathway/animal-health-and-welfare-pathway), boosting productivity, food security and exports

In April 2023, Defra ministers commissioned the Dartmoor Review Panel, chaired by David Fursdon, to carry out a rapid review of protected site management on Dartmoor. [The independent review of protected site management on Dartmoor \(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-protected-site-management-on-dartmoor/independent-review-of-protected-site-management-on-dartmoor\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-protected-site-management-on-dartmoor/independent-review-of-protected-site-management-on-dartmoor) (the 'Review') was published on 12 December 2023.

The government thanks David and the Review Panel for their work. This response sets out the government's response to the recommendations,

progress to date with implementing certain recommendations, and further actions it will take to implement the Review.

For specific details on individual recommendations, read the [government response to each Dartmoor Review recommendation](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-protected-site-management-on-dartmoor-government-response/government-response-to-the-independent-review-of-protected-site-management-on-dartmoor-by-recommendation) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-protected-site-management-on-dartmoor-government-response/government-response-to-the-independent-review-of-protected-site-management-on-dartmoor-by-recommendation>).

## Overview

Dartmoor has one of the largest semi-natural moorland habitats in the country. It has the highest concentration of Scheduled Monuments in the UK and supports a diverse ecosystem of plants and wildlife, including large areas of dry heathland and blanket bogs.

However, the Review confirms that over recent years the relationship between farming, nature and other impacts like climate change are not balanced on Dartmoor. Wildlife and nature on Dartmoor are declining in a way that may jeopardise the value that Dartmoor brings to local communities and visitors.

Farming on Dartmoor is also economically extremely marginal. Defra figures nationally, for Farm Business Income in England, showed that in 2021 to 2022 Less-Favoured Area (LFA) grazing livestock farms benefitted from very high output prices (sheep prices were up by 25% on 2020 to 2021 and cattle prices by 12%), but the average direct agricultural income for these farms was still only £200 for the year.

In developing this response, the government's focus has been on:

- supporting and encouraging collaborative relationships between Natural England (NE) and Dartmoor's commoners and stakeholders
- giving farmers and land managers confidence in government policies, so they can make the most of Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes
- supporting robust strategy and governance for Dartmoor

Our short-term priorities include plans to:

- create the report's proposed Land Use Management Group (LUMG), to strengthen partnership working and provide a longer-term governance structure
- ensure farmers on Dartmoor are supported through this transition period through the extension of their Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreements so they can plan to adapt to any future changes to management, agreed by the proposed LUMG

- support food production on Dartmoor through the extension of HLS agreements and transition to Environmental Land Management (ELM) agreements

Our longer-term priorities include plans to:

- provide tailored advice for future agri-environment schemes and agreements on Dartmoor and support nature alongside food security
- explore innovative tools and ideas to better support farmers on Dartmoor in delivering environmental outcomes and maintain viable upland farming communities

The findings and recommendations in the Review were based on the agri-environment scheme offers available at that time. In January 2024, we published an update to the [Agricultural Transition Plan 2021 to 2024](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/agricultural-transition-plan-2021-to-2024) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/agricultural-transition-plan-2021-to-2024>) which set out increases to scheme payment rates and new or amended actions for accessing scheme funding. This announcement included a new and improved moorland offer, which built on the actions that already exist in the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) scheme.

This government response reflects the current and new agri-environment offers to provide an up-to-date picture.

## Vision and governance

The Review makes the case that Dartmoor needs a landscape-level vision, supported by a clear delivery strategy, to give stakeholders, ‘a rallying point and a clear sense of direction’.

It notes that Dartmoor National Park Authority’s (DNPA) Partnership Plan provides such a vision and should be fully supported by Dartmoor’s commoners and stakeholders.

The government agrees with the Review that the [DNPA Partnership plan](https://www.yourdartmoor.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0033/436677/DNPA_partnership-plan_jun22_FINAL_spreads-compressed.pdf) ([https://www.yourdartmoor.org/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0033/436677/DNPA\\_partnership-plan\\_jun22\\_FINAL\\_spreads-compressed.pdf](https://www.yourdartmoor.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0033/436677/DNPA_partnership-plan_jun22_FINAL_spreads-compressed.pdf)) provides the strategic vision needed to make progress on Dartmoor.

The DNPA Partnership Plan, also known as the management plan, sets out 7 themes, which describe what they want to achieve on Dartmoor, and how they will achieve this. The themes include:

- a better response to climate change
- better for the next generation

- better for nature and natural beauty
- better for cultural heritage
- better for people
- better for farming and forestry
- better for business and communities

As with every protected landscape nationally, this management plan must, by law, be reviewed every 5 years. The current [DNPA Partnership plan \(https://www.yourdartmoor.org/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0033/436677/DNPA\\_partnership-plan\\_jun22\\_FINAL\\_spreads-compressed.pdf\)](https://www.yourdartmoor.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0033/436677/DNPA_partnership-plan_jun22_FINAL_spreads-compressed.pdf) runs until 2026, at which point it will be reviewed again. The government encourages Dartmoor commoners and stakeholders to engage with and fully support this plan. The Review endorses the plan but notes that the plan alone is not sufficient.

The Review recommends Dartmoor stakeholder organisations and Defra Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs) "reinforce Dartmoor's governance through the creation of a Land Use Management Group". It recommends the group be "tasked with developing a multi-functional land use framework and a land-use plan for Dartmoor".

We agree with these recommendations and recognise a role for Defra to help facilitate the implementation of a LUMG. As part of this, Defra will appoint an independent chair who will be supported by a secretariat, provided by the DNPA (and funded by Defra) in the day-to-day running of the group.

The group will primarily be responsible for developing a multi-functional land use framework and land use plan for Dartmoor. It will also be responsible for overseeing other recommendations in the government response, under the following themes:

- Vision and governance (recommendations 3, 4 and 5)
- Protected site management (recommendations 7, 8 and 9)
- Land use, ecology and biodiversity (recommendations 11, 12, 13 and 14)
- Future of agri-environment schemes (recommendations 17, 19, 20, 23 and 25)
- Grazing and vegetation management (recommendations 29, 30, 31, 32 and 33)
- Rollover of HLS agreements (recommendation 36)
- Natural England's future operations on Dartmoor (recommendations 38, 39 and 41)
- Dartmoor statutory bodies (recommendation 42)

The group will run for two years. We expect the first meeting to be held no later than autumn 2024 to help inform the next steps for future agri-environment agreements in 2025 and to start making progress as soon as possible.



The Defra appointed chair will set the membership for the group (in consultation with Defra) and will be accountable to the Defra Secretary of State (SoS). The chair will report back to the SoS in quarterly progress reports.

Natural England supports the creation of an LUMG and is fully committed to work with the group to discuss the Review's recommendations and agree next steps.

Defra and Natural England will take lessons learned from the Review and the LUMG and explore how some mechanisms and solutions could be shared for best practice at a national scale.

## Grazing and vegetation management

The Review sets out a wide range of vegetation management challenges faced on Dartmoor including:

- poor hydrology, resulting from peat cutting
- poor drainage and erosion
- the dominance of *Molinia*
- encroachment of gorse and bracken
- poor condition of heather and dwarf shrubs communities

Taken together, these challenges mean that largely the grazing regime is not working for farmers, the environment, food production or visitors. The Review notes that this results in wider problems, such as a build-up of flammable material across the moor and poor access. The role of grazing in contributing to and potentially solving these issues is explored in detail in the Review.

We agree with the Review's assessment, including the observation that under-grazing can be as much of a problem as over-grazing. The key is getting the right grazing (in terms of grazing load and species mix) in the right location at the right time of year; a challenge which is compounded by grazing on open moorland with animals straying.

A conservation grazing regime should aim to restore and sustain heathland vegetation and diversify plant communities, such as those over-represented by a single species, for example, *Molinia*. It would also need to explore how shepherding can be used to even out grazing pressure and address the continuing effect of historic peatland drainage.

Currently, it is difficult to agree a regime, because across the different commons there is not a shared view on the right sort of grazing needed on certain areas. Equally, the design of agri-environmental schemes did not always support

farmers to make changes even when the right grazing regime had been identified.

The Review recommends a number of options for grazing and vegetation management including:

- reviewing grazing management to manage Molinia overgrowth
- supporting more cattle on the moor to help manage Molinia and land recovered from Molinia
- de-linking ponies and cattle to financially support ponies as a native breed/population
- recognition of 3 species grazing as a vegetation management tool across Dartmoor
- reduced stocking in winter where necessary and where adequate shepherding has failed (except for the semi-feral Dartmoor Hill Pony)
- wildfire management and mitigation for effective grazing and vegetation management

Since the Review was published, details regarding the moorland offer were published in January 2024 as part of the update to the [Agricultural Transition Plan 2021 to 2024](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/agricultural-transition-plan-2021-to-2024) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/agricultural-transition-plan-2021-to-2024>). The new approach was designed to address exactly the sort of challenges identified by the Review and we thank the Review team for their collaboration.

The Review identifies Molinia management as a top priority for Dartmoor. The government agrees that controlling Molinia will be a crucial step towards restoring the moor.

Within existing agreements on Dartmoor, there is flexibility for farmers and land managers to develop management plans that will help tackle Molinia, but we recognise we need to do more to break out of the current cycle faced by farmers and land managers.

Overgrowth of Molinia and the decline of heather populations cannot be solved by a single intervention, but through a combination of different practices. In the new moorland offer, there is an action to support grazing with cattle and/or ponies. This action is in recognition of the value both cattle and ponies bring to the moor, like creating a more varied sward structure and for effective management of Molinia.

As part of this action, applicants must have a minimum percentage of their permitted grazing livestock units per hectare (GLU/ha) as cattle or ponies, rather than sheep. In this action, it will not be possible to have targeted cattle and pony grazing for short periods of the year over the selected stocking density. However, this will be explored as a potential approach from 2025 onwards.

The moorland offer provides a payment for stocking cattle and/or ponies, at the appropriate density, recognising the value of ponies such as both Dartmoor ponies and Dartmoor Hill ponies for conservation grazing. As with all animals grazing the moorland, ponies must be included in the stocking density calculations linked to the moorland actions, as they contribute to grazing pressure on the moorland.

If ponies were excluded in the stocking density calculations, the government would have no control over grazing rates on the moorland and there would be potential for significant over grazing. To balance the needs of conservation of the pony herds and grazing, the new moorland action will be subject to monitoring and evaluation. Impact on pony populations will be continually monitored for any adverse effects and mitigations will be explored to ensure no further reduction in population numbers.

In the new moorland offer, a supplement is available for grazing land using native breeds at risk. This supplement will be available for livestock that are included in the native breed list on sensitive grazing habitats (currently this includes the semi-feral Dartmoor Hill Pony population on Dartmoor and the pedigree Dartmoor ponies).

The government agrees with the Review in that 3 species grazing should be maintained and therefore have actions that focus on sustainable livestock management within the new SFI moorland offer.

There is also a payment in the offer for shepherding stock, which will be available on land above the moorland line. The 'shepherding livestock on moorland' action will pay applicants to take stock off the moorland for periods of time and actively shepherd stock whenever they are on the moor. The action has stepped payments, which offers flexibility in the amount of time stock are on the moor, and farmers can select the months most appropriate to their farm.

Having created an ELM offer that has the potential to address many of the challenges, we need to help farmers and commoners move into updated agreements as soon as possible.

The Review highlights the difficulties around removing stock in the winter. The government recognises difficulties faced by commoners when off wintering livestock or providing accommodation for sheep. We are exploring potential approaches to managing these issues.

The government agrees that positive action is required to help address the issue of livestock straying across the moor, as the Review recommends.

We will welcome the employment of agisters or reeves by the Dartmoor Commoners' Council or other stakeholders and agree to the use of any additional shepherding, where it would lead to improved management of grazing livestock.

The Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme provides another option to support action on livestock straying. FiPL provides funding for grazing management equipment, such as gates, cattle grids, and handling facilities. It also offers bespoke or innovative grazing management opportunities, including virtual fencing. Defra will determine whether it is appropriate to fund similar equipment through the ELM schemes in the future.

Wildfire management and mitigation is another key aspect of grazing and vegetation management. The government agrees that wildfire control and prevention is a high priority on Dartmoor. Actions that will help achieve favourable condition on sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs), re-wet peatlands and increase water storage across the moorland have the dual benefit of increasing the resilience of moorland to wildfires. These actions can be funded through the ELM schemes.

In addition, Defra is exploring how to further support farmers in mitigating wildfire risk, including through actions that maintain fire and fuel breaks on significant high-risk habitats such as moorlands. However, wildfire mitigation remains the land manager's responsibility.

Deer are more abundant and widespread now than at any time in the past 1,000 years. Deer negatively impact woodlands, agroforestry systems and other treescapes, as their foraging activity can inhibit woodland regeneration and natural colonisation. They also cause damage to agricultural crops and result in an estimated 70,000 deer vehicle collisions in England, annually.

There is evidence to suggest that the lethal control of deer is effective, as a measure to protect priority habitats and help manage their wider impacts.

Through Countryside Stewardship, we already pay for actions to support the management of deer in woodlands. This year we are amending our deer management offer to fund management across the landscape, enabling more effective population control. This will include providing payment for deer management on moorlands where they are having a negative impact on priority habitats and species.

We are also increasing payment rates to better reflect the complexity of management actions required and we will continue to offer capital items for non-lethal control of deer, for example, through fencing.

## **Land use, ecology and biodiversity**

Despite protected site designations (SSSI and Special Areas of Conservation) on Dartmoor, the Review confirms the ecology and biodiversity of the landscape has declined. Large areas of upland heathland, peat and blanket bogs are often in poor condition because of historic peat cutting and drainage. The moor is

drying out in many areas, affecting its ability to store carbon and regulate river flows.

The government's role is to protect the most vulnerable and important habitats while offering farmers the tools and support they need to deliver improvements to the way the environment is managed.

Successful and sustained recovery of these habitats will take years, not least because of the harsh conditions on Dartmoor, which often result in slow vegetative growth. It will require a mixture of both short-term and long-term interventions and will need to be effectively managed through agri-environment schemes or local partnerships. The habitats on Dartmoor are all interconnected, so an integrated approach is needed. Specific actions will be required to tackle issues, like wetland restoration or *Molinia* management.

The government agrees with the Review that one of the top priorities for Dartmoor is improving its hydrology and re-wetting its blanket bogs and the government is committed to improving the conditions of all peatlands in Dartmoor. The government will continue to fund peatland restoration beyond 2025 with ELM schemes being the main delivery mechanism.

The government recognises the importance of peatland projects being able to attract private finance and will continue working to help stimulate the development of high integrity nature markets capable of scaling up private investment for peatland restoration.

The Review draws attention to the Ministry of Defence's presence on Dartmoor and the significant costs to the re-wetting of peatland in Dartmoor associated with unexploded ordnance. The Review also notes the scale of military activity in Dartmoor and the government understands that this continues to cause some disruption to peatland restoration work. The Ministry of Defence recognises the importance of peatland restoration activity in Dartmoor and is committed to working with Defra and the South West Peatland Partnership to address these barriers.

Restoration of the open stretches of upland moorland are not the only important ecological features, but also the creation and development of wood pasture, as the Review highlights.

Trees have far-reaching benefits for farmers, their land, and the environment. Our ELM schemes already pay for the management of existing wood pasture and woodland habitats.

Our schemes also pay for the creation of new wood pasture where it extends, links, or buffers:

- existing scrub
- sites with open grown trees

- wood pasture
- priority woodland habitats

The England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO) pays for the creation of new woodland, and this will transition to become part of the ELM schemes from 2026.

From 2024, ELM schemes will also pay for the establishment and management of agro-forestry systems.

A major project is already under way to find solutions to better protect Dartmoor's temperate rainforest in the face of climate change, air pollution and changes in management. This is being led by Plantlife and supported by the DNPA.

## Protected site management

In the 1980s, large areas of Dartmoor's open moorland were designated as SSSIs and later as a Special Area of Conservation reflecting the national and international importance of Dartmoor's moorland wildlife.

The Review concluded that farmers and land managers on Dartmoor face several challenges when trying to understand the legal protections on their land, the current condition of the land and crucially whether that condition is improving or declining. They felt that information about protected sites, can be difficult to access or understand, meaning that farmers and land managers may not know what state a site was in when originally notified.

There is also a lack of understanding or confidence in the robustness and scientific rigour regarding monitoring and evaluation of site condition.

The Review made a number of recommendations about protected sites, including simplifying the legislative framework, refreshing what SSSIs are notified for, increased monitoring of SSSI condition and better communication of information about sites to landowners and managers.

We are committed to improving the condition of protected sites. The [Environmental Improvement Plan](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-improvement-plan) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-improvement-plan>) (EIP) (January 2023), confirmed our commitment to restore 75% of SSSIs to favourable condition by 2042. It also set 2 interim targets on protected sites that will drive progress to that commitment and statutory species targets. The interim targets are that by January 2028:

- all SSSIs will have an up-to-date condition assessment

- 50% of SSSIs will have actions on track to achieve favourable condition

The current legislative framework for protected sites is a complex integration of domestic and assimilated law with a range of different types of designations but we believe it provides enough flexibility to address the challenges and concerns set out in the Review.

However, we agree that improvements can be made to the way in which information about protected sites is communicated. We want to make it easier for land managers to understand site designations and associated requirements for the land they manage. We also want to make the monitoring and evaluation process more transparent than it has been to date.

The government believes current legislation offers a sufficiently flexible approach towards understanding and improving site condition at a landscape scale. SSSI condition is a key component of assessing and understanding the requirements to meet nature recovery objectives. The feature-based scale enables a more strategic, whole SSSI or landscape scale approach to understanding and assessing condition.

While the ecological characteristics of the SSSI features are standard across the site, the right management for achieving favourable condition will vary across the Dartmoor landscape to take account of other factors.

The existing feature-based approach allows for this variability and the agreement of tailored and bespoke approaches for individual agreements.

Natural England is carrying out a programme of SSSI monitoring and resurveying on Dartmoor, which will be completed by the end of 2024. Natural England will share findings with stakeholders and agreement holders on each common and will explain how this data affects their views on the condition and management of SSSIs.

There are opportunities to deliver a more strategic approach through new mechanisms and funding streams, such as Protected Sites Strategies and Landscape Recovery. Natural England will work with the LUMG to determine which of these could be best used to deliver the vision for nature recovery on Dartmoor.

We also agree that management prescriptions for sites must be easier to understand for those managing that land. The habitat features that were originally designated and notified on Dartmoor SSSIs are still present and of national importance to this day. Any proposed changes to designations would need to be evidence based. This would be a detailed exercise requiring significant resourcing and consultation.

Natural England will work with the LUMG to ensure that general information on site management is more readily accessible and understandable. They have

also reviewed their approach to communicating with individual agreement holders alongside the Rural Payments Agency (RPA).

Natural England commits to working with the Review's proposed LUMG to ensure there is a clear and common understanding about which habitats and species are protected SSSI features, and how these features are linked and affected by different land management practices.

Our response aims to provide legal clarity regarding any operations requiring Natural England's consent ('ORNEC') listed on a SSSI designation, such as grazing.

The government agrees that more clarity is needed in relation to the status of commoners on SSSIs. Commoners are treated as 'occupiers' and do need to gain consent for any operations requiring Natural England's consent listed on a SSSI designation, such as grazing. This position has not been clear in the past and, therefore, The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (WCA, 1981) was amended by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CRoW, 2000), so that it is now clear that the term 'occupier' includes commoners.

Since Natural England was established in 2006, they have been notifying commoners of SSSI designations. However, their predecessor organisations have not always notified commoners of SSSI designations due to the uncertainty of the meaning of "occupier" prior to the CroW 2000 amendment coming into force on 30 January 2001.

Natural England, in consultation with Defra and stakeholder groups, is working on a strategy for how best to address any gaps in notifications for older SSSI designations. They are also assisting commoners to enter, and remain in, agri-environment agreements, pursuant to which they are compensated for agreeing to regulate their grazing rights.

Dartmoor's historic environment is impressive, with over 20,000 entries on the Historic Environment Record, including 1,078 Scheduled Ancient Monuments, making it one of the highest concentrations of Scheduled Monuments in England. Farmers and land managers must adhere to the [Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979](#) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/scheduled-monuments-policy-statement>) in regard to management of scheduled monuments, and where possible, improve the management of these sites of national significance.

## **Future of agri-environment schemes on Dartmoor**



Under-grazing is as much of a problem as over-grazing. Reducing summer grazing of stock, particularly cattle on the moor to achieve favourable condition, has led to areas of *Molinia*, gorse and scrub expanding. This in turn has encouraged livestock and particularly sheep to seek out different vegetation to graze, like heather and dwarf shrubs. Reduction in this vegetation has caused further reductions of stocking numbers, and the cycle continues.

The government agrees that we have a significant role in designing and delivering our agri-environment schemes so that they are fair, provide sufficient flexibility and sufficient reward for actions taken to achieve our environmental outcomes. The government will aim to provide a degree of certainty for farmers and their businesses.

Defra is committed to providing a service offer that is simpler, clearer and faster. We endeavour to provide a high-quality service across our schemes and grants so that farmers and land managers can easily access our offers.

A Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) agreement lasts for 3 years from its start date. It can be 'upgraded' annually to add more actions and eligible land. Countryside Stewardship (CS) agreements can be longer, multi-year agreements. Landscape Recovery (LR) offers the longest agreements. All ELM schemes are open to commoners.

To provide a degree of certainty for business planning, in [our response to the Rock Review \(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rock-review-on-agricultural-tenancies-government-response\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rock-review-on-agricultural-tenancies-government-response) of tenant farming in England (May 2023), the government committed to specifying:

- the duration of each evolved CS option
- the level of land use change for each option, from the current agricultural land uses

The Review recommends that Dartmoor should have a single overarching agreement covering the whole moor to help drive strategic improvements and create a single unifying, vision for the whole of Dartmoor. To deliver this, it recommends that commoners should be able to be part of both a single Dartmoor- wide agreement and an agreement on their common.

The government recognises the challenge of reconciling the needs of commoners to allow grazing of animals and farmers' livelihoods, with the need to improve the condition of protected sites to allow nature recovery. The government agrees that a single approach is needed to reduce *Molinia* and gorse growth. However, a single overarching scheme or agreement may not be practical or deliverable. Dartmoor has a diverse landscape with opposing needs, and a single agreement's scope will not sufficiently cover all requirements.

Support for farmers and land managers to collaborate and join up across a landscape is already available through both CS and LR. Improvements to CS

include targeting our funding towards actions in places where they can have the biggest impacts, including protecting our valued and irreplaceable cultural heritage. CS improvements also include targeting funding in ways that are joined up across larger areas and are designed to deliver outstanding results.

LR focuses on bringing together landowners and managers who want to take a more large-scale, long-term approach to producing environmental and climate goods on their land. LR projects already existing on Dartmoor are also considering how to encourage land managers outside of their project areas to undertake complementary actions for a whole Dartmoor approach to strategic improvements.

The Review recommends the possibility of introducing a Dartmoor-wide grazing scheme. This is an interesting and innovative idea. Actions that focus on common area grazing could make a real difference to the improvement of site condition and jointly support farming practices and the environment. However, the delivery of a landscape level grazing scheme would need very careful consideration.

The bespoke agreements offered through LR could allow participants to take innovative approaches like this, that have not been possible in previous agri-environment schemes.

## **Roll-over of Higher-Level Stewardship (HLS) agreements**

Environmental Stewardship agreements have shown they can help farmers deliver improvements for nature, as part of their businesses, whilst producing food. There are currently 24 HLS agreements on Dartmoor's moorland.

These agreements are aimed at supporting farmers, commoners, and landowners to deliver improvements for a range of environmental outcomes, including improving the condition of moorland SSSIs across Dartmoor.

Some of these agreements have made a positive difference to SSSI condition, showing that in the right circumstances ELM schemes can support nature recovery by farming businesses. Unfortunately, the condition of protected sites covered by the majority of agreements has not improved over the lifetime of the agreement as all parties had hoped.

The government is committed to working with agreement holders to determine how to best support them.

We agree with the Review's recommendations that some of the ways in which the schemes are designed and implemented have contributed to that, alongside

changes in the landscape due to climate change, confusing advice over the correct action to take to see improvements and the need to ensure a viable business.

We have created an improved ELM offer which gives the tools to implement the recommendations of the Review and allows ELM agreements to work for all parties. New agreements will take time to agree. For that reason, we agree with the Review that HLS extensions should move to a 2 plus 3-year extension arrangement.

Negotiations between parties will be conducted sensitively, to support sustainable land management alongside traditional farming practices and uphold the overall condition of protected sites.

We have written to agreement holders to set out proposals for agreeing further annual extensions to HLS agreements going up to 2025. We will work closely with agreement holders over the next period to help them prepare to apply for a new CS /SFI agreement, when the time is right for them to do so. We also want to work with agreement holders who want to agree further HLS extensions, with a plan of action and trajectory for further improvement of SSSI site condition.

There are grant offers available for feasibility studies and implementation plans to help support applying for a new agreement and to look at opportunities for improvement of specific features on land. These grants identify and support new applications for Higher Tier and are particularly relevant for those looking to move from HLS and maximise the environmental benefit on the land in a timely way. As identified in our [Agricultural Transition Plan update](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/agricultural-transition-plan-2021-to-2024) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/agricultural-transition-plan-2021-to-2024>), we are strongly committed to supporting more Higher Tier agreements in future. By the end of 2025 to 2026, we will take forward twice the number of Higher Tier type agreements per year than we do now.

## Food production

The Review makes clear that farmers and commoners on Dartmoor are and should continue to be food producers – which the government agrees with. Dartmoor hill farms are an important part of the wider livestock supply chain. Producing high quality livestock for sale, as part of increasingly sustainably managed landscapes, should continue to be the foundation of Dartmoor farm businesses.

The government will continue to support food production on Dartmoor and the changes necessary for it to continue.

The Review notes the criticality of younger farmers on Dartmoor and their desire to develop their businesses. The government agrees with this and,

working with The Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture (TIAH), we will be offering free membership of the institute for a year to all young (up to 40 years old) farmers on Dartmoor. Membership of TIAH is a great way for all those working in agriculture to develop their skills, access quality training resources and develop their careers.

As well as the expanded SFI and range of grants, we are providing measures to improve animal health and welfare. These offer up to £2,000 a year for farmers who keep both sheep and cattle. The programmes will help farmers lower costs and have healthier and more productive animals on their farms. These programmes are well suited to Dartmoor and the government will focus promotion and engagement activity of them across Dartmoor over the next 18 months.

There are 2 small abattoirs that are important for the farms on Dartmoor. The £4 million Smaller Abattoir Fund is now open and eligible smaller abattoir business owners across England, including the Dartmoor area, have been invited to apply for funding.

Following a recent consultation, we are planning to lay legislation to establish a mandatory carcass classification and price reporting scheme for sheep slaughtered on a deadweight basis. This will help ensure that producers receive information on the classification of their livestock and that they are paid for their animals in a fair and transparent manner. In addition, sheep farmers will be able to use the grading information provided to target market preference and improve productivity.

## Communication

Until recently, Natural England has not been successful in building and maintaining trusted relationships with many farmers on Dartmoor. Agreement holders have reported receiving poor levels of support, advice, and communication.

The government recognises the importance of clear and consistent communications between Defra and Defra Group organisations with individual commoners on Dartmoor and is taking an active role to fix this.

At the Oxford Farming Conference earlier this year, the SoS committed to reviewing interactions between Defra group organisations and farmers. Defra has initiated a project focused on improving relationships between farmers and all parts of Defra group, including but not limited to Natural England, aiming to reduce any feelings of suspicion or distrust. This includes reviewing our communications to make sure they are clear and the language and tone is respectful. Defra is also creating new opportunities to listen to farmers about