

FOREST FARMING GROUP (FFG)¹

A Vision for a New Forest Environmental Land Management Scheme

INTRODUCTION

The New Forest hosts an extraordinary diverse range of species that are rare, uncommon and declining elsewhere in the UK and Western Europe. The Hampshire Biodiversity Action Plan has identified 50 notable species meriting special regard, with **41 of these found in the New Forest**. The area is well placed to sequester increased levels of carbon and it also boasts exceptional water quality, which requires protection. Faced with the phasing out of Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) and the various Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) schemes lapsing, along with the funding mechanisms that have historically underpinned these and many other public goods and services, **the New Forest faces a precarious funding gap**. As such there is an urgent need for certainty beyond the next couple of years.

Fortunately the various public and non-public bodies that share the management of this unique landscape have a very good track record of collaborative working in partnership. Fully illustrated by both the Verderers' of the New Forest' HLS board, the New Forest National Park's Partnership Plan and the work of the Forest Farming Group to date. We believe that this places the New Forest in a very good position for being a significant beneficiary of potentially all three of the Environmental Land Management Schemes².

THE FOREST FARMING GROUP; AIM AND OBJECTIVES

Aim

To deliver the public goods defined in the Government's 25-year Environment Plan (Ref A) and those identified in the FFG's Natural Capital Report (Ref B) the FFG seeks to ensure that, any Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELM) are fit for purpose for the unique landscape of the New Forest and it's people. In doing so ELM will deliver landscape and nature recovery whilst protecting the traditional way of commoning and Forest life.

The FFG works collaboratively in designing a 'joined up', landscape-scale land management scheme over the New Forest National Park's 27,691 hectares (68,424 acres) of common land (Ref C). As such it is critical that future land management schemes operating in the New Forest fulfil the following objectives:

1. **Bespoke** and **flexible** in nature
2. Delivers **nature recovery** through **habitat restoration** and **management** which protects and enhances biodiversity and sequesters and stores carbon
3. Delivers enhancements in **water** quality across the catchment
4. Protects and promotes a **sustainable** and **robust commoning** system with the highest standards of animal **welfare**
5. Supports enhanced management of **recreation**
6. Facilitates **educational** engagement
7. Protects and enhances the New Forest's **historic environment** and landscape character
8. Improves **air** quality in the area

¹ FFG Members: Verderers of the New Forest, New Forest National Park Authority (NFNPA), New Forest Commoners' Defence Association (NFCDA), Natural England (NE), Forestry England (FE), National Trust (NT), National Farmers Union (NFU).

² Currently assumed to be: Landscape Recovery (LR); Local Nature Recovery (LNR); Sustainable Farming Initiative (SFI).



Objectives – The Detail Why and How

1. Bespoke and Flexible

It is vital that the New Forest has the ability to enter into a bespoke scheme which recognises the scale of the public goods being delivered and the unique way in which the New Forest is managed.

Why:

- i. Complex management – There are 27,691 hectares (68,424 acres) of common land in the New Forest National Park and whilst more than 90% is owned by three significant landowners, there are in excess of 40 public and private landowners, over 700 commoners and many statutory bodies including the Verderers, NFNPA and NE. As a result, no one entity holds overall ‘management control’ for the proposed scheme area.
- ii. Unique commoning system - The commoning system in the New Forest is unique in a number of ways. Firstly, the system is administered by a court of Verderers; a statutory body that employ Agisters (stockmen) to ensure the highest standards of welfare for the livestock depastured. The Verderers have their own bylaws that they enforce in relation to animal welfare. Secondly, unlike other commons, the commoners here have an unspecified number of rights which has created complexities in determining how payments are distributed. Further to this the vast number of individual commoners means that it is not practical to establish a “Commons Association” in line with definitions imposed by previous agri-environment schemes.

The commoning system is entirely dependent on “back up” land; privately owned enclosed land that provides accommodation for wintering livestock as well as providing forage for winter months. This land is likely to be outside of the scheme area but should be eligible for support from a New Forest ELMs as in many cases would not be eligible for a scheme in it’s own right.

How:

- iii. HLS model – The Verderers of the New Forest’s HLS scheme has operated very successfully. A trilateral agreement between the Verderers, FE and NFNPA established an ‘HLS Board’ incorporating NE and NCFDA as non-voting members. The Board is tasked with delivering outcomes and is able to exercise discretion on how these are delivered. We would like to see a future scheme adopt this model however, we believe that the membership of any such board should be reviewed to ensure that the commoning community is adequately represented and the board accounts for the fact that there may be multiple landowners.

2. Nature recovery

Why:

- i. A unique and protected landscape – The New Forest is a unique mosaic of heathland, mires, grassland, woodlands, rivers and ponds. It boasts one of only four significant sites of bog woodland in the UK, as well as one of the six best sites of riverine woodland. Together with other scarce wetland habitats the Forest also contains the most extensive lowland valley mire systems in north western Europe. All of these habitats are under threat from climate change, new diseases, invasive species and boundary encroachments. Urgent action is needed to ensure the unique habitats of the New Forest are more resilient, better



managed, bigger and more widespread. Ecosystems need to be restored and wildlife needs to be able to move through the landscape freely if it is to adapt to change which means looking beyond the open Forest and across the wider countryside.

- ii. Climate change and carbon sequestration – There are around 90 valley mires in the New Forest (75% of valley mire systems in Western Europe), they are one of the most important lowland peatland systems. Peatland habitat has the largest capacity to store carbon storing up to 2,000 tonnes of carbon per hectare which is significantly more than the next largest store of carbon in the UK, ancient native woodland, which on average stores around 400 tonnes of carbon per hectare. The impact of climate change on the New Forest is likely to be wide reaching, with warmer and wetter winters, hotter and dryer summers, rising sea levels and an increasing frequency of extreme weather events, the effects of which are already being seen. The natural environment is one of the most important and effective solutions we have for capturing and sequestering carbon long-term.

How:

- iii. Restoration of primary habitats (mire, wet heath, dry heath, riverine woodland, pre-inclosure broadleaf woodland and 18th – early 19th century broadleaf plantations)
- iv. Restoration of primary habitats which remain within Inclosures. This may include improvements to fencing in order to more successfully exclude livestock and/or deer.
- v. Control of invasive species – Extending control beyond the ongoing commitment across a wider landscape and exploring alternative methods of control that do not rely on herbicide application.
- vi. Soil protection – review of management techniques to reduce damage to soil structure and mycorrhizal associations – tractor/harvesting equipment reviews to minimise ground damage or use of ground protection equipment.
- vii. The New Forest faces regular encroachments onto the common lands usually to enlarge gardens or pony paddocks. Many are small areas but the cumulative effect is significant. Because of the unique nature of the various rights and ownerships the burden of fighting many of these encroachments falls on a small group of volunteers. Funding to support this work would ensure that the unique habitat is preserved.
- viii. Monitoring to gather scientifically robust evidence about the effectiveness of the various restoration techniques, highlighting the ecological benefits and any issues relating to the use of them.
- ix. Specialist species surveys to assess the status of rare and protected wildlife.
- x. Assessments of carbon capture baseline and evaluation of the potential effects of habitat restoration works.
- xi. Protection and restoration of verges (which form part of the SSSI) in areas where erosion has occurred caused by vehicle damage.
- xii. Maintenance and restoration of Forest lawns (areas or grassland often beside streams or ponds, with more nutritional grazing and rich biodiversity).

3. Water Quality

Why:

- i. The freshwaters, wetlands and coastal habitats of the New Forest are made up of rivers, streams, ponds, lakes, bogs, wet woodland and coastal marshes that are among the most important aquatic habitats in Europe. The freshwater and wetlands habitats of the New



Forest include the largest collection of relatively undamaged lowland valley mires in Britain⁵.

How:

- ii. A New Forest Freshwater and Wetland Habitats Restoration Strategy (2019) has been agreed with a range of stakeholders. The strategy has an agreed vision to “have naturally functioning New Forest freshwater and wetland habitats that can sustain and support the biological communities that have been lost.”. The strategy will:
 - Take an Integrated Catchment -based approach to hydrological and ecological connectivity
 - Develop a framework for baseline survey data
 - Develop site level wetland restoration options

4. Sustainable & Robust Commoning

The iconic New Forest landscape and it’s unique ecology is dependent upon a system of common grazing as evidenced by the New Forest’s Special Area of Conservation (SAC) designation (*Ref E*). It is crucial that a new scheme delivers long term support to this system to ensure that the many public benefits continue to be delivered.

Why:

1. The extensive nature of the New Forest’s grazing system has shaped the areas rich biodiversity over centuries. Commoners own and tend to the livestock depastured, relying on local and traditional skills to do so. A combination of increasing pressure on the availability and affordability of property and back up grazing, together with the increasing pressure on the open forest from recreational activities, means it is becoming a more difficult and less attractive vocation for the next generation to pursue. The New Forest’s HLS agreement successfully funded a number of locally designed and run initiatives to help improve New Forest Pony bloodlines, upskill members of the commoning community and provide funding towards facilities and equipment essential for commoners to continue practicing the highest levels of animal welfare.
2. The New Forest’s commoning system underpins the areas tourist industry, worth in excess of £500m per annum (*Ref D*).
3. To ensure the best possible value to the public we need to ensure that there is a focus on initiatives and legacy projects that will promote and support the grazing system beyond the life of the schemes’ management agreement.

How:

4. Conservation Grazing scheme – Any new scheme must have provision for a subsidiary scheme to deliver targeted maintenance support to changing circumstances and new challenges faced by commoners. It should also incentivise and reward practices that promote the highest standards of welfare, help sequester carbon, mitigate the impacts of climate change and provide better protection to the local watercourses and the Solent. The Verderers HLS scheme currently underwrites the Verderers Grazing Scheme, which incentives and supports practicing commoners that individually sign up to an annual grazing



contract. The terms of the VGS are reviewed regularly and are adapted in response to changes in commoning practices to ensure it is only rewarding the very ‘best practice’.

Grant funding for the provision, maintenance and repair of facilities needed to support conservation grazing is also essential. This may include funding towards handling equipment necessary for an individual commoner to safely handle their livestock or shared facilities such as the sale yard at Beaulieu Road or the many pounds/corrals and holding pens located across the New Forest. These facilities underpin the commoning system and local cultural heritage.

5. Support towards Commoners housing and land availability - Survey and monitor land used for back up grazing to gain a better understanding of the role this land plays within the commoning system and the public benefits delivered. It is vital that other Schemes (however well intentioned) do not swallow up the back up grazing that is vital to the commoning system.
6. Animal Health & Welfare – The HLS Scheme has helped fund many initiatives to improve the welfare of livestock. This includes funding towards the team of Agisters who monitor and ensure the highest levels of care for the livestock depastured. It has also funded reflective collars and tags that are fitted annually to animals reducing the risk of road traffic accidents. Funding should be made available to better equip and inform commoners (many of which have small numbers of livestock) on matters such as biosecurity, disease outbreaks and further improving welfare standards.
7. Advice, training, and support for commoners – Commoners need assistance operating their businesses in a financially sustainable way, managing their costs and maximising income in a “non BPS world”. Support is also needed to assist them with managing their back up grazing in a way that maximises public benefit both on the common and their private land. Information on how they can reduce their carbon footprint will also be crucial.

In addition, there should be support ensuring that local knowledge and skills are passed down to future generations. This could be in the form of mentoring and apprenticeship schemes as well as one off training events.

8. Native and rare breed protection – The New Forest pony is registered as a rare breed due to the native breed’s diminishing gene pool. Promotion and protection of the New Forest Pony breed is crucial to the breeds survival. The HLS scheme has funded a number of such projects which require continued investment. The extensive commoning system is also suited for native and rare breed cattle and pigs. Incentives for keeping rare breeds will help preserve bloodlines and protect genetic variation of these breeds.
9. Protecting cultural identity – there are growing pressures threatening the survival of traditional local events and activities such as pony sales, the New Forest Show, Drifts/Round-ups, traditional Point-to-Point races and Pannage. Without support and greater protection we could see many of these activities that have taken place for centuries lost.



5. Recreation management

Much of the New Forest is designated as open access land under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. Rights of access on the Crown Lands are administered by Forestry England in accordance with national legislation and local bylaws. The New Forest is one of the most accessible National Parks in the country and a study in 2018 calculated that recreation and leisure visitor days to the New Forest rose to an estimated 15.2 million in 2017. It is important that there are the appropriate resources deployed locally to allow effective management of recreation to ensure that it compliments the needs of visitors without compromising the landscape, biodiversity or traditional grazing system.

Why:

- i. To support the work of the New Forest organisations, a New Forest ELM scheme will need to support investment in recreation infrastructure and employment opportunities. Relative to its size, the New Forest is probably one of the most visited National Parks in the world, it has the third highest number of annual visitors of any of the UK's National Parks, despite being one of the smallest. The tourism economy (which generates nearly £500 million annually) is heavily reliant on many of the public goods and services provided by the New Forest.

How:

- ii. Support for measures that will convey to visitors and local people the things that make the area special. This might include:
 - Information and interpretation about the special qualities of the New Forest
 - Enabling an increase in the number of rangers/volunteers who can engage with visitors and encourage responsible recreation
 - Support for guided activities and events that provide authentic experiences for people who visit the New Forest
- iii. Address significant and/or widespread negative impacts of recreation through education, visitor engagement and the enforcement of existing, and where needed, new bylaws. Impacts include:
 - Disturbance of wildlife by people and dogs
 - Feeding of commoners livestock/animals by the public
 - Animal accidents on unfenced roads
 - Physical erosion of verge habitats by parking
- iv. Protect and enhance the New Forest's working and natural landscape, and improve the recreational experience by influencing where recreation takes place by supporting:
 - Changes to car parking distribution and capacity
 - Selective improvements to the network of permitted off-road routes for cycling, carriage driving and organised events
 - Route information on cycle waymarkers to help people navigate on permitted Crown land cycle routes



- v. Support the collection of data about recreation, its benefits, and its impacts on the special qualities of the New Forest

6. Educational Engagement and Citizen Science

Why:

- i. the New Forest's ecosystems and cultural landscapes provide an important area for academic study and research, some of it involving international institutions. At a national and regional level, it also provides opportunities for volunteering and skills training to the general public.
- ii. Facilitate citizen science projects that can help with the management of the New Forest such as the reporting of non-native species.

How:

- iii. Support an increase in the uptake of formal education opportunities through the provision for school/group visits including on farms through visitor facilities as well as involvement in practical conservation work and work experience opportunities.
- iv. Encourage wider volunteering to support the delivery of conservation projects, visitor management, litter, wildlife monitoring and education events.

7. Historic Environment

Why:

- i. The undisturbed soils and landscapes of the New Forest preserve a long and remarkably rich heritage of human activity. Recent aerial surveys have shown that the Forest is rich in features that are still to be investigated.
- ii. The long legacies of commoning and management of the Crown Lands, in the form of historic settlement patterns and vernacular building design, the breed lines and brands of New Forest ponies, and the knowledge and skills held in commoning families, are all important cultural assets.

How:

- iii. Support for the protection of previously unrecorded Non Designated Heritage Assets identified by the aerial laser scanning funded through the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme.
- iv. Further investment in aerial laser scanning and aerial photography/satellite imagery interpretation to provide baselines of vegetation extent and condition monitoring including tree health and capture more discreet archaeological features eg bee gardens.

8. Clean Air

Why:

- i. The respective Habitats Regulation Assessments for both the New Forest District Council and New Forest National Park Authority adopted Local Plans recommending that on-going air quality monitoring should be undertaken within the New Forest's designated sites. This is to



establish whether nitrogen deposition, acid deposition and ammonia levels from traffic emissions are having an adverse effect on the integrity of the designated sites. Aerial deposits of nitrogen may exceed the threshold limits above which the quality and character of SAC vegetation begins to be altered and adversely impacted. This could potentially lead to a loss or change of habitat type which in turn will impact the species reliant on that habitat.

How:

- ii. Seven monitoring locations have been specifically targeted on areas where: (i) air quality may exceed the critical load in the future; and (ii) where the adopted New Forest Local Plans are expected to contribute at least 1% to the critical load. This can also be achieved through an ecological survey of the identified habitats in the seven sites in the late spring or early summer of 2021 and 2024 to evaluate habitat condition and any change in its status.

References

- A. DEFRA (2018) *'Our Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to improve the Environment'*
- B. Forest Farming Group (2019) *'Understating the New Forest's Natural Capital'*
- C. Rural Payments Agency (2022)
- D. Tourism South East (2015) *'The economic Impact of Tourism New Forest'*
- E. JNCC (2008)

Appendix

- i. *The ecological value of the New Forest's grazing system*



Importance of Grazing in maintaining the condition of The New Forest SSSI, SAC, SPA and Ramsar Sites

The importance of grazing is emphasised in all key documents relating to the nature conservation of the New Forest. *Please note that some of the below quotations may have been updated or amended since first publication.*

The New Forest SSSI citation refers not only to the importance of grazing but also to the commoning community that supports it:

“The New Forest is probably sufficiently large to ensure the long term survival of the characteristic flora and fauna within the wide range of habitats. Smaller isolated examples of the component habitats are vulnerable to biological impoverishment but here in the New Forest has survived largely because of the persistence of a pastoral economy based on the exercise of common rights of grazing and mast together with protection afforded by Crown ownership. This, and the management of vegetation in the Open Forest through burning and cutting programmes, administered by the Forestry Commission on the Crown Lands, maintains the quality of the grazings, ensures the prevention of natural succession and encourages local diversity in plant communities. The pastoral economy in turn depends on the continued existence of a small community of commoners who make up a discrete social unit and this combination of natural and cultural elements contributes to the maintenance of the New Forest habitats.”

The New Forest SAC Citation:

“The New Forest embraces the largest area of ‘unsown’ vegetation in lowland England and includes the representation on a large scale of habitats formerly common but now fragmented and rare in lowland western Europe. The intimate mosaic of habitats owes much to the local geology and traditional commoning grazing system, a situation which is uncommon in lowland England.”

Extract from the Site Conservation Objectives and Supplementary Advice:

“The habitats include lowland heath, valley and seepage step mire, or fen, and ancient pasture woodland, including riparian and bog woodland and a range of acid to neutral grasslands. Nowhere else do these habitats occur in combination and on so large a scale. Outstanding examples of thirteen habitats of European interest are represented together with two priority habitat types, bog woodland and riverine woodland, these habitats support an exceptionally rich diversity of fauna and flora which for much of the site are dependent on traditional management practices of grazing through Rights of Common complemented by annual heathland burning and cutting programmes. These provide structural diversity and a range of niches for plants and animals to utilise.”



The SAC Plan extracts:

“The maintenance of the habitats and species for which the New Forest is of international importance is dependent upon the management activities of the various owners and occupiers and commoners. Of fundamental importance throughout the Crown lands and Adjacent Commons is the persistence of a pastoral economy based on the existence of Rights of Common and mast. The commoners’ stock, mainly cattle and ponies, roam freely over extensive areas of the New Forest unenclosed lands, playing a vital role in maintaining open habitats free of scrub and controlling the more aggressive species such as bracken and purple-moor grass, and maintaining the richness and variety of heathland and woodpasture habitats. This is complemented by the annual heathland burning and cutting programmes which ensure that at any one time there is an extensive range of structurally diverse habitats for plants and animals to utilise.”

“Grazing & Heathland Conservation: Over most of its range, with the exception of exposed coastal transitions where scrub and tree growth are suppressed, heathland is a complex of community types which left to themselves would eventually become woodland in one form or another. Consequently, the maintenance of species-rich heathland communities in the form and condition we have in the Forest today requires continual management intervention by man and his domestic animals. The component communities, their origins and development are described in Part 1. Here we are concerned with the impacts of depasturing animals on the Forest heathland communities and the issues arising from such a practice.

It is apparent that the Forest heathland communities are not all subject to the same grazing pressure. The reasons for this are given below, but the outcome is a diverse set of habitats not only adapted to withstand the effects of defoliation and fluctuations in herbivore population numbers, but dependent upon it to retain the special interest associated with each. (It should be noted that not all land within the SAC is subject to commoner grazing rights. Private land may or may not be grazed depending on the wishes and circumstances of the owner).

Removal or a significant long-term reduction in grazing pressure would cause rapid changes in the plant and animal communities comprising the Forest heathlands. The overall impact would be a rapid expansion to dominance of the more aggressive and competitive species (eg *Molinia* and scrub) at the expense of the less competitive species, and a dramatic impoverishment of the Forest flora and fauna adapted to the long tradition of Open Forest grazing management (see Byfield & Pearman 1992 for an evaluation of how a lack of appropriate management has caused adverse changes in the distribution of Dorset’s rare heathland species). From a nature conservation perspective this would particularly impact on those features of special interest for which the Forest is designated and would therefore be catastrophic and unacceptable.

In the context of the New Forest (as opposed to un-grazed or lightly grazed heathland communities elsewhere) Table 3.6.1.1 shows the level of grazing required to maintain the habitat in favourable condition and what the likely impacts of under or over grazing would be. It demonstrates that the Forest heathland communities and the species which they support, are dependent upon a range of, and fluctuations in, grazing pressures. The next section describes how the extensive New Forest grazing system, maintains this variation resulting in the mosaic of communities apparent today.”



SAC Site Improvement Plan extract:

“There are many pressures and threats to the condition of the New Forest SAC and SPA the main ones being:

- A significant long term reduction in grazing pressure through loss of commoning. This would lead to a dramatic change in the flora and fauna of the New Forest and the impoverishment of the special features for which it was designated.”

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