

Dartmoor Farming Futures

Developing an alternative approach to agri-environment delivery on common land

An example of outcome focused delivery

1. Background – why?

Agri-environment schemes (Environmental Stewardship (HLS, UELS and ELS) and the classic schemes (CSS and ESA)) are an important, if not essential, source of funding for those farmers managing the uplands. This is particularly true for those providing livestock to graze open moorland. In South West England the majority of the moorland is common land. In 2007 80% of hill farmers surveyed in the southwest uplands were in an agri-environment scheme.

These moorlands provide a unique array of ecosystem services and public benefits; 20 m tonnes of carbon within the peat soils, 90% of drinking water to households in Devon and Cornwall, 10% of England's Scheduled Monuments and 285 sq miles of public access.

On Dartmoor 25,169 ha. are notified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and the majority of the SSSI is of international significance and designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). The high moor captures significant amounts of rain water and in 2011 over 94,000 MI were abstracted via 20 licenced sources (SWW data). The public have open access to about 47,400 ha. of Dartmoor and the linear Public Rights of Way total over 727 km.. The Moor's historic environment is also impressive with over 17,500 entries on the Historic Environment Record.

Dartmoor became an Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) in 1993. Prior to then the DNPA had offered Management Agreements on some land. The ESA proved popular providing a hill farm with about 14% of its Farm Business Income. By 2004 the area within an ESA agreement reached 71,209 ha and included the majority of the 35,882 ha of common land. Environmental Stewardship replaced the ESA in 2005 and when ESA agreements on the commons came to an end most commons apply for a Higher Level Stewardship scheme. By 2012 some farmers had had almost twenty years of experience of agri-environment schemes.

The common land on Dartmoor is divided into 92 registered commons. Most are contiguous and these "home" commons surround a central common – The Forest of Dartmoor. Most commons have a Common Association and it is this Association that usually applies for an agri- environment scheme. During the transition from ESA to Environmental Stewardship the commoners expressed concerns including:

- The lack of ownership of agreements by farmers/commoners,
- That agreements failed to reflect local conditions & farming practises,
- The land management prescribed by the scheme focused on SSSIs and often failed to recognise other land management required by the other ecosystem services.
- Farmers were denied opportunity to contribute their skills and experience to the agreement.

Nationally Natural England was concerned over high number of commons agreements that were failing. They suspected that the lack of ownership of the agreement by individual commoners and a lack of clarity on why certain land management was being sought were contributing factors.

2. History/Context

After FMD's dramatic impact on hill farming in England the Government established a Task Force for the Hills. In 2001 the Task Force published a series of recommendations including: That the payment basis for agri-environment schemes should reward the production of environmental outputs as well as reflecting agricultural income foregone. This recommendation was reiterated in The State of Farming on Dartmoor 2002 commissioned by the DNPA. This report stressed that hill farmers would benefit from more cooperative working and promoted the "Moor Futures" approach. By 2005 the Moor Futures initiative had two strands; The Dartmoor Hill Farm Project and the Dartmoor Vision. Both projects involved farmers and sought to address those issues, identified by farmers, as having a negative impact on hill farming. (see Box 1)

During the construction of the Vision and in subsequent discussions within the Dartmoor Vision Group (a farmer group established to help deliver the Dartmoor Vision) concerns were expressed, by farmers, over the failure of agri-environment schemes to address local conditions and to incorporate local farming practices. Similar concerns were also raised over the lack of a strategic approach to the array of public benefits (now more often referred to as ecosystem services) found on the moorland. Such issues often led to poor ownership of agreements by the farmers. An even more important issue related to the farmers having no clear understanding of what their schemes were expected to deliver and why. Such concerns were raised with Defra in 2009 by Dartmoor Commoners' Council and DNPA. A proposal to develop a new approach to agri-environment delivery on common land followed in 2010 and Natural England enabled the design stage (stage 1) to be progressed as part of their SW Ecosystem Pilot The initiative developed as a partnership steered by DNPA later that year.

Box 1 Moor Futures

Moor Futures comprises of two elements: the Dartmoor Hill Farm Project and the Dartmoor Vision. Both strands were set up by Dartmoor National Park Authority to help ensure a viable future for Dartmoor farmers by supporting them through collaborative activities, facilitation in developing ideas, provision of advice, guidance on training opportunities, and identifying sources of funding.

'Making a difference for farmers'

The Dartmoor Hill Farm Project was set up in November 2003, as a result of recommendations set out in State of Farming on Dartmoor 2002. The project is run by Dartmoor National Park Authority with funding support from the Duchy of Cornwall. Additional funding provided by the RDPE. Current initiatives include Moor Skills – an apprentice scheme for young hill farmers, Moor Wool – adding value to the fleeces from Dartmoor sheep and providing assistance in accessing RDPE grants to address farming and animal health issues.

The Dartmoor Vision

The Dartmoor Vision sought to provide clarity on what the various agencies wanted Dartmoor to look like in 2030 whilst providing the farming community, especially the commoners (75% of the unenclosed land is common land), with a clear statement on the land management priorities. The Vision was published in 2006. The farmers involved in the vision process continued to meet, as the Dartmoor Vision Group, until 2009. This group developed into an alliance of hill farmers and agencies from Dartmoor. The group produced a leaflet 'Moor Farming - Delivering the Dartmoor Vision' that sets out the problems faced by hill farmers and the important role they have in managing the moorland. It is intended to raise the profile of the importance of moorland farming in delivering an array of public benefits and natural resources. The leaflet was produced in April 2008.

3. Process

The project began in August 2010 supported by DNPA, Natural England and the Dartmoor Commoners' Council. An independent facilitator was appointed. The initiative comprised of two stages. The first stage was to be completed in six months, i.e. by March 2011.

Stage one would seek to design an approach to agri-environment delivery that:

- Made clear to the participating farmers what they were expected to deliver and why.
- Improved ownership of the scheme.
- Ensured the resulting agreement maintained or enhanced all relevant ecosystems.
- Reflected local conditions (vegetation, farming practices, weather).
- Enabled local farming practices to continue.

and then in stage two:

- Pilot the new design.

4. Stage 1 – designing a new approach to agri-environment delivery

A list of commons on Dartmoor that were nearing the end of their current agri-environment agreement (ESA) was obtained from Natural England. An assessment of those eco-system goods and services found on each common identified two commons that between them had examples of all the natural assets required for the pilot. The selected commons also represent very different areas – one high moorland and the other moorland edge. The two commons were invited to participate in stage 1 and asked to provide commoners willing to contribute to the design stage. The group from each common was composed of active commoners (holders of commoning rights that still exercise those rights by providing grazing livestock on the common). Both areas of common land have the potential for environmental improvement (i.e. land that would currently be targeted for Higher Level Stewardship).

The two groups of commoners began by identifying a number of key issues that guided their ambitions. These included:

- The new scheme must be simple and easily understood.
- There must be a clear link between the payments and those public benefits provided by the work undertaken under the scheme.

- The new scheme must enable local farmers to offer their expertise and experience to achieve a successful outcome.
- The new scheme must enable local farming practice and traditions to survive.
- The scheme should enable new graziers to join.
- It should build on the positive aspects of previous agri-environment schemes.
- The new approach should engender trust between all parties

Whilst initially the two groups were encouraged to remain independent of each other their emerging designs were very similar and were, towards the end of stage one, merged into one design.

The new approach.

The design is for land with the potential for environmental improvement and is set out as a number of steps. The main parts of the process are:

1. Identifying the ecosystems services relevant to the common,
2. Agree a set of outcomes that reflect those ecosystem services, (this is what the farmers agree to deliver). *This follows a consultation process involving NE, EA and DNPA and this process was initiated in the pilot by farmers .*
3. The Commoners' Association provide an internal deed setting out how payments are distributed.
4. The Commoners then decide on appropriate land management necessary to deliver outcomes, this is set out in an annual work programme.
5. A monitoring programme is agreed with Natural England that illustrates progress towards achieving outcomes and give confidence to commoners that their activities are relevant and correct.

+ decision tree

The proposed new approach to delivery is predicated on an agreed set of outcomes, understood by all, and allowing the land management, necessary to deliver the outcomes, to be determined by the farmers and the owners of the common. There are no prescriptions within the agreement.

Step 1: A simple spread sheet enables all the public benefits, that might be relevant on their land, to be considered. (see Appendix 1). The completed form is then discussed with Natural England. If an application is encouraged the applicant moves to step 2.

Step 2: The applicant(s) begins to draft a set of outcomes, relevant to the public goods on the land. These draft outcomes are then discussed with a small group of representatives from relevant agencies, including the National Park, Environment Agency, English Heritage and Natural England. This avoids one individual dominating the process. Their role is to ensure that the outcomes are clear and appropriate. The outcomes should be compatible with the guidance set out in the Dartmoor Vision. The meeting also provide the opportunity to ensure that work for one outcome does not compromise or damage another. The final version of the outcomes provide the core to the agreement. Example of a set of outcomes is included in Appendix 2.

Step 3: Prior to the start of the agreement the Commons Association or management committee will have agreed with the participating commoners the following:

- An internal deed - describing the operation of the committee and agreement.
- A Management Plan, that includes stocking rates, timing of grazing, type of stock and swaling programme, written by the commoners or on their behalf. The plan will conform to all appropriate regulations, including those arising from cross-compliance, the National Park and the Dartmoor Commoners' Council.
- Agreement from those commoners signed to the agreement on the following year's work plan including grazing regime, stock numbers and additional work. The farmers provide a stocking calendar.

Step 4: The active graziers decide on what land management is necessary to deliver the outcomes. This is agreed, including a stocking calendar, with the Association and a work plan for the next 12 months is written.

Step 5: A programme of review and monitoring is provided by the farmers and agreed by Natural England following discussion and consultation. A monitoring programme is essential and should provide confidence to the commoners and to Natural England that the land management is progressing in the right direction.

The monitoring schedule contains the previously agreed outcomes and together form the application and are submitted by one individual on behalf of the common. Additional information provided by the applicant at this stage would include a map of the area including the boundary, a short report setting out information relating to any designated sites, legal obligations (e.g. arising from scheduled monuments and SSSIs), an internal deed (describing how the scheme will operate) and a list of those benefiting from the agreement.

The draft design is intended to greatly increase the potential of agri-environment schemes to deliver real change and enhancement of a suite of eco-system services and public benefits, whilst encouraging farmers to take ownership the scheme.

The new approach was trialled on four home farms to see if the approach was applicable to land other than common land. All the farmers thought that the design was practical and would work on their farms. *See separate note 1.*

Box 2 Cost of designing the new scheme

Initiated in 2010 a facilitator was employed to oversee the design phase.

The group of 8 graziers from Haytor met six times from 5 October 2010 to 10 February 2011. Each meeting was attended by 6 to 8 farmers. The second group was comprised of active graziers (commoners) from the southern part of the Forest. The group met seven times between 15 September 2010 and 2 March 2011 and the average attendance was 10 farmers. Both groups' meetings lasted between 2 and 3 hours.

The two groups of commoners contributed at least 280 hours for which they received no financial recompense.

The total costs incurred by the facilitator between August 2010 and March 2011 was £13,000

The Partners' steering group met 5 times. No additional costs were created by the steering group and costs of participation were covered by the members.

5. Stage 2 – piloting the new design

In July 2011 Natural England approved stage two. The facilitator was retained and the two commons that participated in stage one were offered the opportunity to prepare an application to deviate from their existing agri-environment scheme to enable the trials to take place. On one common this required waiting for their HLS agreement to begin (March 2012) and on the other their existing ESA had 18 months until its end. Both commons agreed to continue and engage in stage two. The two commons each provided a working group comprised of active graziers; farmers with rights to graze sheep, cattle and/or ponies.

The two areas selected were:

1. The Forest of Dartmoor (common) of approximately 11,400 ha.. A large area of high moorland dominated by blanket bog and deep peat. It is almost entirely notified as an SSSI (and Natura 2000 sites). The common includes nine important water catchments and an impressive assemblage of archaeological sites and monuments.
2. The Haytor and Bagtor commons. These two commons are managed as one unit (c700 ha.) and currently have one ESA agreement over both commons. An outlying and almost separate block of common land well used for recreation and public access. It is rich in historical sites and includes a geological SSSI.

Both areas are in an agri-environment scheme; one in an ESA and the other HLS (and UELS). These existing agreements were used to underpin the pilot and secure funding. The trials progressed as derogations to the existing schemes. The benefit of this approach included security to both Natural England and to the participating Common's Associations. Should one of the trials fail for any reason an agreement would be immediately be available to ensure the land remained under agreement and a mechanism was in place to ensure appropriate land management. For the participating farmers this situation gave confidence that funding would be available. The drawback to this approach was that the existing schemes had already allocated payments to the commoners and a re-allocation of funds, to reflect work associated with the outcomes, was not possible. The Internal deeds were retained from the existing agreements.

During the trials it is essential a record is kept of all deviations from the prescriptions within the agri-environment schemes. A process by which a farmer requests consent to deviate from the prescriptions was devised by the Trustees of the Forest. A copy of the request form is appendix 4. The form is completed by the farmer and submitted to the Forest Trustees in advance of any change to agreed stocking or other activities. The form requires the farmer to justify the proposals and their relationship with achieving selected outcomes. The other pilot also proposed a similar recording process.

The commoners followed the design set out in stage 1. Both groups chose to initiate a set of outcomes and then develop these outcomes in consultation with NE and DNPA . The final set of outcomes became the basis of the trial and were core to the application for the derogation. The application for the practical aspects of the pilot also included, written by commoners, a local vision – what they wanted to achieve within the agreement/pilot. Also

included were a list of issues the farmers considered relevant to the area and list of the ecosystem services found there.

As the trials started both groups identified the need to have a formal annual meeting with Natural England. This meeting would fulfil several objectives including an opportunity to report on progress towards delivering the outcomes and the monitoring programme. Part of this reporting is a short annual report to NE including a record of work undertaken during the previous year. Much of the land management would be reported on maps, including maps showing areas swaled (controlled burn) and cut. The annual report would be available prior to an annual meeting with Natural England to discuss progress and report on the monitoring programme. A formal internal process was designed by the Forest to ensure any departure from the existing HLS prescriptions would only be possible following securing consent from commoners within the local part of the common and from the Forest Trustees.

6. Monitoring and evaluation

A monitoring programme directly related to the outcomes is an essential part of the scheme. Both trials were consented to by Natural England before the individual monitoring programme for the pilot areas becoming available. This enabled the monitoring programme to be developed as the outcomes were tested and refined.

Throughout the development of the monitoring programmes the commoners indicated a wish to be more involved in the monitoring, claiming that this would improve their understanding of how their scheme was progressing. The involvement of third parties was also considered. This would apply particularly to species monitoring and could be carried out by amateur and professional groups or individuals. Alternatively, commoners could receive training to enable certain monitoring to be undertaken. This idea is being considered and such training might be funded by the RDPE.

Actions necessary to record progress against each outcome were identified. The monitoring programme also included a brief description of what “good condition” for each outcome would look like or indicators of success.

The process of developing each programme started with the commoners describing what monitoring they proposed. These ideas were then further developed with Natural England. Natural England provided expert ecological help to identify indicators of success and suitable monitoring methodology. The commoners reviewed these suggestions to identify those activities they felt confident to undertake and those they did not.

The Rural Payments Agency (RPA) are responsible for scheme compliance monitoring. The RPA were invited to participate in the development of each monitoring programme. This enabled the programme to include those aspects of the scheme that would be inspected should it be selected for inspection. This would benefit the farmers by indicating, in advance, what evidence they needed to provide. Due to the pilots operating in conjunction with an agreement it is necessary to record all deviations from the prescriptions provided by the HLS agreement. The form devised to record the deviations sought by individual farmers also provide this record and are retained by the administrator as a record of all permitted deviations from the agreement.

Examples of a monitoring programme is included as annex 1.

Box 3 Cost of piloting the new scheme – stage 2.

The facilitator was retained from August 2011 to prepare both commons for participation in the trials and oversee the first months of the pilots.

The group of 8 graziers from Haytor met six times from 28 September to 29 October 2012. Each meeting was attended by an average attendance was 7 farmers . The Forest work group comprised of ten active graziers (commoners) together with the land owner’s representative Forest. The group met nine times between 17 November 2011 and 25 October 2012 and the average attendance was 6 farmers. Both groups’ meetings lasted between 2 and 3 hours.

The two groups of commoners contributed a total of at least 263 hours for which they received no financial recompense. All the participating farmers also attended additional events and meetings to explain DFF to other commoners and third parties.

The total costs incurred by the facilitator between August 2011 and November 2012 was £25,500. This included funding the facilitator to explain DFF to third parties. It is estimated that costs associated with promoting and explaining DFF total xxx .

The Partners’ steering group met 4 times . No additional costs were created by the steering group and costs of participation were covered by the members.

7. Lessons learnt from the pilot

The practical implementation of the design resulted in some amendments. These are listed below:

- The method of identifying which ecosystem services are relevant to the are proposed for an agreement was simplified. The resulting spread sheet is included as appendix 1 a & b.
- Compiling the set of outcomes is critical to improving ownership as well as increasing understanding of what is to be achieved by the agreement. Enabling the commoners to start the process increases ownership but is costly in time and resources. Encouraging commoners to select from a menu of outcomes relevant to their area (National Park, Landscape Area) would reduce the time and effort needed by both Natural England and the applicants. Such a menu of options could , previously, be agreed by the relevant agencies including Natural England, Environment agency and , if relevant, the National Park..
- For those selecting outcomes relating to SSSIs it was necessary to establish what the SSSI should look like by the end of the agreement (in ten years’ time). This is different to describing the condition of the individual SSSI units. Site visits, photographs of examples of similar vegetation in good condition and short descriptions can all play a part in conveying an accurate picture to those responsible for delivering the land management. Providing each commoner with a brief synopsis further engages and refreshes their role.

- Engaging with the agencies to secure their comments on the outcomes can take considerable time. All too frequently those asked to engage in discussion on the development of outcomes failed to recognise the difference between an outcome and a prescription; they told the farmers what to do rather than what the result should look like.
- Agreeing on the number of outcomes was important. The farmers wanted the outcomes to reflect the scope of the ecosystem services on their common but at the same time wanted to avoid committing to delivering more outcomes than they could afford to do. At the same time the agencies with legal responsibilities wanted to ensure these were included, e.g. Scheduled Sites and SSSIs. The discussion on the number of outcomes was useful and helped explain the importance of some features.
- More outcomes = more money?
- The two Commons Associations intend to retain stocking calendar for internal use and control. However rather than seeing a stocking calendar “imposed” they have taken responsibility for its production and administration.
- Securing the monitoring programme was a lengthy process. Exchanging drafts between numerous commoners and agencies resulted in delays and required numerous meetings. Now a template is available and the requirements better understood subsequent attempts to draft a monitoring programme should be much simpler.

Included stocking calendar and base line photos. + photos of vegetation (local) in good condition. + examples. What is required by RPA?EU?

8. Principle findings: Why agreements fail

- Inappropriate communication, including the methods used to communicate, between Natural England and the commoners was frequently cited as an issue. Broad band coverage is poor on most of Dartmoor but there is a presumption from some agencies that information placed on a web site (e.g. SSSI condition updates) will be accessed by farmers. This is rarely the case. In addition to inappropriate methods of communication, language used to explain agreements and lack of time available to the farmers were all identified as issues that adversely impact on the smooth running of agreements.
- Most commoners/farmers who participated in DFF did not understand why the prescriptions required by the ESA/HLS schemes had been imposed.
- For those sites with SSSIs farmers frequently stated that they had no clear vision of what the SSSI should look like in good condition. They also did not understand the terminology used to describe the condition of SSSI units.
- Often information is not readily available to individual commoners. They in turn rely on their association to tell them what to do. This further distances them from the reasons for and ownership of the agreement. However once clarified the farmers must accept responsibility for delivering the agreement.
- There is a widely held view that the prescriptions, required by agreements, are often not relevant to local conditions. There is a perception that these prescriptions arise from studies emanating from elsewhere (usually the northern moors) and are

seeking to secure types of vegetation not found in their locality. The same concerns relate to the monitoring; its poorly understood and therefore farmers “suspect” it is inappropriate for their common.

- Increasingly commoners see agri-environment funding as core to their business; without it the business may fail. This change in perception may in turn reduce their commitment to the scheme and lead to a failure to respect the objectives of the scheme.
- Prescriptions, especially those relating to stocking levels, may increase the burden on a limited work force. Managing small numbers of stock can be more work than managing larger numbers. This can lead to abandonment as farming moorland becomes too difficult.
- A better understanding by agency staff on the limitations and role of rights holders on common land.

9. Lessons learnt: Suggestions to improve delivery

- Communication - use appropriate methods and language. For example: Hill farmers have less capacity to attend meetings during the day so hold meetings in the evening.
- Facilitation clearly has a role in complex agreements especially those on common land that include multiple rights holders, owners and other interests.
- Establish ownership of the agreement by clearly explaining what is important and why and what is expected by the scheme. Provide sufficient time to communicate effectively with all.
- Shift of responsibility for deciding on the appropriate land management back onto farmers (no one else to blame).
- Overcome lack of trust from both parties, this would be improved by increased clarity on what is required and why.
- Outcomes process improves clarity and encourages ownership. Farmers deciding on the correct land management to deliver the outcomes relies on them understanding what the outcome is and why it's important. Also the agencies need to understand that the correct land management may take a long time to deliver the outcome.
- Recognise and respect the time constraints on both agency staff and farmers.

10. Findings applicable to the next RDPE programme (to be developed)

- Outcome focus
- All ecosystem services? Or most
- Offer of facilitation and training
- Providing farmers with the opportunity to decide on the land management also has the additional benefit of sustaining local farming traditions and reflecting local conditions.
- NE input and effort at start should reduce effort later especially if all understand what is required and why.
- Monitoring could be much more positive. A collaborative process engenders better understanding. What will be measured and how needs to be clear and agreed up front.
- Design suitable for farms (not common land)

11. Summary to be added

12. References

- i. Farming Survey 2006-2007, SWUF, Land Use Consultants 2007.
- ii. Hill Farming Systems in South West England: Economic viability and the delivery of public goods. University of Exeter, Duchy College and Cumulus Consultants, 2008.
- iii. ESA take up, English Nature ??
- iv. Task Force for the Hills, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, May 2001
- v. The State of Farming on Dartmoor 2002, Centre for Rural Research, University of Exeter, 2002
- vi. Dartmoor Vision, DNPA,
- vii.

+ Decision tree

Appendix 1a & b – tables showing ecosystem services

Appendix 2 examples of outcomes

Appendix 3 examples from monitoring programme

Appendix 4 form to request deviation from HLS prescriptions.

Box –describes project. Facilitation. Time commitments. Cost. Keep separate to avoid confusion over running of new approach.

Notes:

(59% of 401,200 ha common land in England is notified as SSSI (49% as SAC = internationally important)).