

The Verderers of the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme

Annual Report 2012/13

REVIEW OF 2012

The New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme is a 10 year agreement with Natural England, which started 1st March 2010 and runs to 29th February 2020. The HLS is a partnership between the Verderers, the Forestry Commission and the National Park Authority. Activities are delegated to the partners to manage: the Verderers manage the grazing-related projects; the Forestry Commission manages the Wetland Restorations; and the National Park manages Historic and Archeological Protection, and Education and Access, and bird surveys.

2010 was the start up year of the Verderers HLS. 2011 was a year of consolidation. 2012 has been a year of focus: we have focused on delivering the requirements of the 2010 HLS agreement.

The HLS board is made up of one voting member from each of the partner organizations: I, Dominic May, represent the Verderers; Mike Seddon took over from Kevin Penfold in the summer last year, and he represents the Forestry Commission; and Alison Barnes represents the National Park. Additionally, we have two non-voting members: Jenny Thomas from Natural England has recently taken over from Rachel Bailey; and Graham Ferris from the Commoners Defence Association. The board has met six times since last year's AGM, every two months.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Kevin Penfold and Rachel Bailey for their help, good work and support during a critical period for the HLS.

The HLS scheme funds projects to conserve or improve the ecology and environment of the New Forest Crown Lands, excluding the inclosures and camp sites. The HLS board is concentrating on the agreement objectives:

Nature Conservation / Biodiversity

To achieve target condition (favourable or unfavourable recovering) for the designated habitats and species through appropriate management and depasturing of domestic stock, and the physical restoration of unfavourable habitats.

Landscape

To maintain, enhance and restore characteristic landscape features which contribute to the traditional semi-natural landscape character of the New Forest.

Historic Environment

To improve the understanding of the historic environment in order to support positive conservation management of visible and below ground archaeological and historic features, and restore historic buildings which contribute to the area's heritage and special qualities.

Resource Protection

To restore habitats and landscapes damaged by soil erosion and diffuse pollution.

Access

To improve the quality of visitor experience and to influence behaviour through improved understanding of the New Forest's natural and historic environment, and land management.

HLS funding is £80 per hectare, and we have recently suffered a large reduction of our area of the Crown lands in the scheme from 19,447 down to 18,581 hectares. This is due to the removal from the scheme area of those thrown-open inclosures in which there is no plan to reduce the commercial plantations of non-native conifers by the end of the HLS in 2020. This has reduced our annual payment from £1,550,801 to £1,486,480.

In 2012 we introduced the new Verderers Grazing Scheme, which pays the commoners for each animal they turn out. The grazing stock of ponies and cattle are the architects of our unique New Forest landscape, and the purpose of the Verderers Grazing Scheme is to maintain this commoning activity. The introduction was a huge success: 91% of all animals on the Crown Lands are entered into the VGS. The first VGS payments to commoners were made on 28th February.

Natural England is keen for us to encourage more cattle on the New Forest, which have a different way of grazing to ponies, so diversifying the environmental benefits of grazing. We encouraged this in our new Verderers Grazing Scheme by paying 25% more grant for cattle than ponies. This increased the proportion of cattle from 24% to 34%, and allowed the HLS to successfully apply to Natural England for the Cattle Grazing Supplement. This extra funding from Natural England is paid on the Grassland and Heathland areas within the HLS, not the Wood Pasture, in total 13,057.66 hectares. It is paid at £35 per hectare, increasing the HLS grant from Natural England by £457,018.10.

Previously, an additional stream of funding was available to us from Natural England, for individual Capital Projects. Although funding many important projects in the last three years, the *ad hoc* nature of the application process and project management for these Capital Projects created a huge administrative burden on the three partners of the Verderers, Forestry Commission and National Park Authority. So we have decided that from now on we will no longer be applying for Capital Projects, but pay for such additional projects from our annual payment.

Along with this change of strategy, we are reducing our administrative burden and increasing our long term planning by focusing on consistent annual grants to partners and Forest organisations for the specific requirements contained within our HLS agreement with Natural England.

For the Verderers, these annual grants are to organisations which promote benefits to grazing or stock management. So we are now giving an annual grant to the New Forest Livestock Society for marketing, to encourage more buyers to come to the Beaulieu Road sales; an annual grant to the New Forest Pony Publicity Group, to promote the local native breed nationwide; an annual grant to the Young Commoners to fund driver training before trailer tests; an annual grant for the replacement of three drift pounds each year.

Minor projects in 2012 included the supply of reflective collars for ponies and now for cattle too, micro chipping of ponies pre-sale, and the purchase of 2-way UHF radios for the Agisters. A small grant fund for commoners is managed in house by Colin Draper, who is of course our Scheme Manager. Funding for the Stallion scheme is an ongoing annual expenditure.

The Verderers sponsored one staff member of the Land Advice Service at the National Park Authority. In 2012 the Land Advice Service carried out the baseline survey of all our RLR parcels to identify condition, and provide management advice on what we need to do where. For example, where we need to remove non-native species, or where poaching needs managing.

Our wetland restoration programme suffered a difficult year. Firstly we had a very wet summer in 2012, so we had to postpone plans on those sites which did not have good gravel road access: the HLS board wants to leave the forest in an improved condition after major works, and the wet ground therefore meant we had to take the difficult decision to delay some work areas to future years.

Secondly, we had local opposition from the Friends of Latchmore who are concerned about the restoration in that area. Wetland restoration is the catch-all phrase we use for reversing the effects of deep drainage channels which were originally created at a time of intensification of agriculture and forestry: it involves re-inserting meanders in streams, infilling deep man-made drains, and protecting mires. I am a supporter of wetland restoration, particularly as it helps to re-create wilderness areas which had been previously lost. The Friends of Latchmore oppose wetland restoration at Latchmore, being concerned that it will radically alter the landscape; and, in the absence of environmental assessment, that it will cause damage to the area, its important habitats and its species. We shall have to agree to disagree. However, in the process of their opposition, the Friends of Latchmore have alerted us that some of our procedures were not 100%. We have listened to them and changed our methods: for example, we will now start the restoration of Latchmore Stream at its source in Island Thorns. And we will now apply for planning consent for future major engineering works.

Our major wetland restoration project was at Driver's Nursery and Queen's Meadow. Despite the wet summer, there is good gravel track access and work has now been completed except some minor consolidation works which await drier conditions. We also worked at Penny Moor, but had to stop because we found a collection of rare plants, which we clearly did not want to destroy. So both ends have been completed, but a section in the

middle is awaiting a decision from Natural England as to how to proceed. We postponed work at Latchmore and Soldier's Bog due to the wet weather.

The HLS continues to fund the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust's project to eradicate two non-native species, New Zealand Pigmy Weed and Parrots Feather. We have also completed a survey of bracken stands that will enable us to improve the bracken management on the forest.

2012's Historic Environment projects have included funding for continued LiDAR analysis; funding for the first phase of the National Park Authority's World War II archeological project; and we have completed the restoration of six Scheduled Ancient Monuments.

Natural England gives us an incentive to host educational visits by school groups. 2,125 children aged between 7 and 16 benefited from a total of 39 education visits to the New Forest led by the National Park Authority Education Service and New Forest Centre Education Service. I should add that most of the groups would have been unable to access education about the Forest were it not for the financial assistance provided by the HLS funding.

PROGRAMME AND PROJECTS FOR 2013

The Forestry Commission is scheduling wetland restoration this year. The major projects are Wooton in the South West, and Island Thorns in the North of the forest. There are also plans for Buckherd Bottom, Soldiers Bog, the completion of Penny Moor, and a range of other smaller works including restoration of some forest lawns encroached by trees. Some of these projects will be dependent on planning permission.

Our HLS agreement also requires us to complete a number of habitat and species surveys, and the Forestry Commission is commissioning these works, which include survey of the New Forest Cicada; Small Fleabane; Fairy Shrimp; Southern Damselfly and ponds. My thanks to Jane Smith for all her hard work in the Forestry Commission on behalf of the HLS.

Innovative works will also be completed to protect two scheduled ancient barrow monuments from damage by burrowing rabbits.

The Verderers will continue to fund one staff member in the Land Advice service; we will continue to operate the small grant fund to enable commoners to improve their holdings; we have allocated an annual sum to re-build three or four stock pounds a year; we will continue with annual grants to the New Forest Pony Publicity Group, New Forest Livestock Society for marketing, New Forest Trust for maintenance of the Beaulieu Road sale yard, CDA for trailer training for young commoners, and reflective collars for cattle as well as ponies to try to continue the welcome reduction in animal accidents. Well done to Colin Draper, who as well as managing the Verderers' Grazing Scheme, also does lots of good work for the HLS scheme as a whole.

Our HLS agreement requires us to carry out some bird surveys: SPA birds (woodlark, nightjar and Dartford warbler); and waders including lapwing, redshank, snipe, curlew, ringed plover, little ringed plover, and oystercatchers. Our first bird survey will take place this year and will identify the breeding population of nightjar. This is being well-managed by Ian Barker at the National Park Authority, and the HLS board thanks you.

We will be funding more car free ditching. Previously this was a Capital Work, with separate funding from outside our annual payment. As I described earlier, we will now be funding this from our annual payment, and it will be an ongoing yearly project.

Using the bracken report which we commissioned and is now complete, we will be funding extra bracken control, additional to that which the Forestry Commission are doing annually at present. Again, we will make this an ongoing yearly project.

The projects that I have described today show why the New Forest's Higher Level Stewardship Scheme is such an important funding stream, and the board will continue to manage it for the benefit of our beautiful, unique, working New Forest.

I have mentioned some people individually today, but there are many others who have contributed to our successful 2012, and I thank everyone who has been involved in some way, small or large.

I do hope that you have found this second AGM to be useful: this is now an annual event, to continue to operate our HLS in an open and transparent manner.

We will now take your questions.



Dominic May, Official Verderer
Chairman, Verderers of the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme
3rd April 2013

