



Minutes of Meeting – 27th April 2026 Parke, Bovey Tracey

1. Apologies

Helen Booker, Nick Bruce-White, David Atwell, Liz Nabb, Andy Crabb, Tracy May.

2. Joining on-line: Paul Hawkins, Laura Cardenas, Verity Winn (for Helen Booker), RSPB.

3. Minutes of the meeting on 30th March 2026

An amendment to paragraph 8 was requested to state that ponies are ‘sometimes’ excluded from agri-environment scheme stocking calendars.

4. Actions from meeting on 30th March 2026

Land Use Framework: A draft narrative to describe the land use framework is being put together by Emma Magee and Janet Dwyer.

Electric cattle collars: Whilst not recorded as an action, one member raised the fact that there are certain inconsistencies in the Government Animal Welfare Committee’s guidance on the application of NoFence / electric collars, which could make their use more difficult. Further clarity is needed on this guidance and there may be a need to consider making a representation about these.

Single scheme paper: A revised version of the single agri-environment scheme paper had been produced by the Focus Group and time would be allocated at the May DLUMG meeting to discuss it.

Project plan: The project plan, taking DLUMG to project end in March 2027 would be finalised for the next meeting. This is in addition to the existing costed work-plan and Defra reporting structure the group management team use, and is intended to show how the various workstreams now come together via a ‘plan on a page’ to simplify the articulation of the project outputs and what is happening, when.

Trial monitoring and methodologies: The need for robust methodologies and data capture from the landscape scale and Molinia focussed trials had been discussed at the last meeting and the management team is ensuring that Professor Mariecia Fraser is inputting into work. In addition, Professor Davy McCracken from the Scottish Rural College, is providing comments on the landscape scale element. Janet Dwyer has also kindly looked at the Molinia work and has sight of the landscape scale trials protocol.

Julian Donald from NE has been inputting into the latter and has shared the protocol with Andy Nesbitt from NE's monitoring team and Andy has provided comments.

New Forest Visit: Some people were finding the June date difficult to make and Tom agreed to investigate changing it.

5. Update from Central Dartmoor Landscape Recovery Project

Chair, John Dracup, kindly gave an update on project progress. The team is working tirelessly to meet a now revised submission deadline of the end of May. The Vision that was co-created with the Duchy remains the guiding light. The impact of the workload on the staff was significant and one of the key learnings from the LR process.

Progress has been easier on the enclosed land, including newtakes, but inevitably, this is more challenging on the commons, with multiple graziers to engage with and the scale of land involved. A challenge also exists in balancing the need for a management framework that satisfies the contractual terms of LR, in a way that provides sufficient flexibility across such a diverse land area to deliver the various management outcomes. Natural England has recently promoted the development of an adaptive grazing approach for the Central LR. This links well with the DLUMG's landscape scale trials and a meeting between the DLUMG team and Central LR has taken place with NE to explore this, including development of a practical approach to monitoring, which again, links well with DLUMG work. The LR team is further developing the framework of an adaptive plan and its monitoring with Natural England and DLUMG can connect with this whilst it is further developed through the assurance stage of the LR process, meaning there will be time post submission in May, to do this.

John explained that during the first two years of the LR, it is proposed that there is a fifty percent reduction in winter sheep numbers, with the balance of stocking remaining unchanged, subject to a review at the end of year two. This gives time for the project, via the concept of the adaptive plan/s to demonstrate that management can be targeted in a way that provides assurance that ecological condition will start to improve where needed, whilst also giving time for the results from the DLUMG trials to connect with the work. In setting timescales for improvement to ecological condition, it was recognised that within these landscapes, change can take a long time to occur. Indicators of a positive trajectory therefore need to be made clear and commoners need to support the process and be engaged in both management and monitoring.

A huge amount of baseline monitoring has been done for Central and other LR projects. There is a risk of being lost in the extent of data and one group member stressed that there is a need to be clear on what the baseline against which condition/s is/are assessed is and what the management plan/s then need to look like.

There was a consensus that the adaptive management plan approach could work well and that there is a positive opportunity to partner with Central LR to evolve this and further explore the principles through the landscape scale trials and in due course, the monitoring work.

Janet Dwyer asked for a copy of a plan showing the three Dartmoor LR land areas, which Tom said he would find and send.

6. Landscape Scale Trials – Presentation from Louis Pearson, Ecologist, Digg and Co

Having shared the first draft trials protocol for this work with the group, Louis attended to give an overview and answer any questions relating to work on Throwleigh and South Tawton Commons.

A baseline vegetation assessment had been done by Louis across both commons. This includes an assessment of habitat type and structure. Digg and Co have designed vegetation classification structures to deal with the imperfections in existing, recorded NVC data for the sites in the context of what was found on site.

The trials take a twofold approach, focussed, plot based work to look at the effects of resting differing vegetation types and grazing these with cattle and sheep, and secondly, herding trials, which use active shepherding to more actively rotate the stock around existing leas to enable rest and recovery of vegetation. This will include an assessment of impact from cattle, sheep and ponies. Full details are in the protocol document.

Comments from DLUMG members were;

- Support for use of standard stock-fencing rather than electric fencing for the plots
- A need to ensure high welfare standards of stock enclosed with any plots. This will be for short periods of circa 8 hours and water will be available. A commoner will also be allocated to provide regular checks and stock will not be enclosed in the event of any weather extremes.
- There was a suggestion that we assess soil type and structure. Tom mentioned he is exploring with Eden, the idea of them doing some seed-bank analysis.
- How do we define 'ecological value'
- Can we relate the movement and impact of sheep grazing with cattle. Many commoners say the lack of cattle movement reduces the movement of sheep, which typically follow them which increases the risk of over-grazing.
- Plot size could be increased to from 25m x 25m to 40m x 40m to reduce the 'edge effect' caused by fence lines and reduce the impact of dunging on the delivery of grazing in small areas
- Plots should be signed to explain the work and an opportunity exists to educate a wide audience about what the project is doing, why and its findings.

- The socio-economic impacts of these trials would be looked at, which the group supports
- Interest was shown in Louis's proposed use of the Ecological Health Index to guide management decision making and assess condition. There is a Patagonian scoring system that could be looked at.
- Shepherding was clarified as the commoners making more regular visits to move stock rather than there being a permanent presence and commoners' costs would be covered in a way that avoids double funding linked to existing HLS schemes.
- Trackers have been looked into for monitoring but the technology is not yet sufficiently developed for sheep. This may change if the trials can be extended into years two and three. Instead, observational monitoring would be used and the delivery will be supported by Digg and Co. Grazing plans are being designed by commoners and Digg and Co and the story of their development and delivery will be captured in a series of film clips which connect with the different interest areas of the group - nature, heritage etc.

Subject to addressing the practical points, there was support for these trials.

7. Controlled Burning on Deep Peat – Trial Work

Time was provided to expand the previous group discussion on the proposal to run a small-scale trial on Harford Common to look at the effect of burning *Molinia* on deep peat.

Some group members had made a representation to the Chair, explaining that any proposal to burn on deep peat went against their internal policies. The landowner, also an experienced environmental consultant, explained the work that he and the commoners in this area have been doing to try and find ways to effectively manage *Molinia* over a number of years, and more recent work, looking at the impact of *Molinia* on hydrology and in turn, peat condition, which has related, negative carbon impacts. Small scale 'patch' burning in appropriate conditions was one thing that he felt was worth exploring as a means of encouraging livestock to spread out and graze *Molinia* dominated areas. Cutting and harrowing of *Molinia* continue to be utilised techniques, but these cannot be feasibly done at any scale and the time and fuel costs plus machinery impact, are significant.

Some were concerned that even if more land was opened up for grazing, there are currently insufficient cattle to deliver the aftermath management, although this could potentially be addressed over time and is perhaps something that needs discussion as part of a strategic plan for *Molinia* management, linked to an assessment of which *Molinia* dominated peatland areas can be hydrologically restored, and which cannot.

One member questioned what the Harford trial would provide that the Lydford trial which is also on peat, but peat below 30cm, does not. The material difference is simply the impact on the different peat depth.

A question over the scalability of burning on deep peat was also raised if there are a number of organisations against it.

The Chair recognised the challenge that in submitting the burning application to Defra for the trial in the name of DLUMG, it connects those member organisations who oppose the proposal with it. A suggestion was made by one of the objectors to the application that the DLUMG withdraws the application in its name and that it is submitted by the landowner. Recognising the impact of this decision on further work the DLUMG may become involved with, the Chair confirmed he would reflect on the discussion and circulate a decision within a week of the meeting.

8. Land Use Framework – Opportunities mapping

Tom explained that a recent VC had been held with Defra's national LUF team, who are very interested in the Dartmoor work. Tom has sent them a summary of where the DLUMG is with this and a mutual commitment has been made to keep in touch. There are no plans at the moment, for Defra to role out a similar model to that being developed on Dartmoor, at a regional or local level so there remains a question linked to how we can best ensure the Dartmoor work is acknowledged and made good use of, including with the DNPA.

Comments on the first stage, base line mapping had been collated by John Howell and these will be passed to Exeter University.

John's paper on the opportunities and priorities, stage two LUF work, had been well received. One member identified the need to ensure that we test the Dartmoor LUF against national LUF priorities. It was also suggested that at the bottom of page 2, the reference to the need to change SSSI boundaries is removed as this is unlikely to be achieved in the medium term even if some are considered impractical.

John Dracup explained that Central LR has gathered a huge amount of data which should be captured in the Observatory.

The opportunities and priorities paper has identified five land use themes which are considered as the basis on which to progress the stage two work. Nature recovery does of course straddle almost everything and when asked how the nature opportunities paper would be taken forward, Tom and members of the nature group, agreed this needed discussion giving the importance of this area of work, so it could be progressed as swiftly as possible.

9. Monitoring

A Project Brief has been drafted and circulated to the group previously. Tom confirmed that this will be released for pricing before the next meeting. A list of academic institutions and other potential providers was being put together. Group members were asked to send suggestions to Tom.

Next Meeting

18th May 2026