



Minutes

23RD FEBRUARY 2026, BUCKFAST ABBEY, 1-5PM

1. Apologies

Nick Bruce-White, Ann Willcocks, Steve Dennis

2. Approval of Minutes from 26th January 2026 meeting

Janet Dwyer raised a typo in section 9, para 3, which should read 'It was agreed that a small focus group should be established'. This will be amended and all approved the Minutes, subject to this change.

It was identified that the September and November 2025 Minutes need uploading to the Group website. January 2026 Minutes will follow. Tom Stratton explained that a request to do this had been made to the DNPA admin team.

3. Actions from 26th January meeting

Tom confirmed these had all been dealt with except for the need to;

1. Obtain the swaling research paper compiled by Dr Tom Greaves
2. Share the Defra reporting milestones document with the DLUMG
3. Follow up receipt of the Protected Sites condition assessment data from NE for adding to the Observatory and LUF work

4. Update on NE resourcing to DLUMG and wider changes in membership

The Chairman advised that David Stone from JNCC has stepped back from the DLUMG due to time commitments elsewhere. The importance of having a JNCC representative was identified and the Chairman and Tom will liaise with David and see if a replacement can be nominated or alternatively, David may be able to act as a contact / conduit.

Layland Branfield, who had joined the group originally in his capacity as Chair of the Commoners' Council has decided to stand down. Tom Stratton will check the group's Terms of Reference to determine if these provide for replacement of this role as a representation for farming, now that Tracy May has become Council Chair. It was noted that Tracy's seat was derived from her role as Administrator for the Forest HLS.

David Slater from Natural England had previously confirmed that Andrea Ayres will continue to represent NE on the group. David Slater will continue to engage with the group's work as needed, and it is expected that Julian Donald will also assist, particularly with the trial work and monitoring discussions. Andrea remains the point of first contact.

David Slater confirmed NE's commitment to supporting the work of the project, but he remains conscious of the workload placed on NE's team, who are spanning DLUMG, Landscape Recovery and dealing with HLS expiries. Wherever DLUMG can identify the need for NE resource in advance, this would be helpful.

Questions were posed to NE regarding stocking levels "Is there to be flexibility in approach, and if so, what is stopping it? Is NE set on supporting what in some cases, will be impractically low stocking levels that do not deliver for nature or viable farming, to mean that the DLUMG is destined to fail?"

Reference was made to a live, site level example of where negotiations involving a move from HLS to CS Higher Tier were triggering the application of 0.16 LU, resulting in understocking which was accepted by the NE Project Officer, the site grazing tenant and the Landlord, a conservation NGO. Because of the inflexibility in the Higher Tier Scheme, the proposed conclusion was to allow the application to progress, but to then grant an annual derogation to enable the stocking level to be adjusted to the right level. This seems inefficient for all parties.

A farmer representative explained commoners are at breaking point. Do they accept what they see as punitive stock reductions through new agri-environment schemes, or do they farm. Commoners do not believe continued reductions in stock is the answer and the debate on grazing has become unhelpfully polarised. Appropriate numbers have to be aligned with the right types and distribution which are all key areas of focus within the trials. Such trials have potential to be extended beyond the term of DLUMG if needed, with support from FiPL and hopefully, Landscape Recovery.

Some clearly feel the evidence does exist to justify certain reductions but all agree this needs to be looked at in the context of the site management outcomes being sought and in most cases, there will need to be more active management of land and stock, including its distribution.

NE confirmed it is committed to flexibility to achieve the right outcomes and they support innovation. It was highlighted that the Fursdon Review promoted such an approach and that NE has Statutory capability to support such experimentation, to aid nature delivery.

PA2's are proposed to provide a means of collating information for each site / common to guide management. It was suggested these provide the appropriate platform from which to discuss stocking and achieve the flexibility where needed. There is concern about the costs of these and the timeliness of delivery, set against the rate at which HLS rollovers and fixed terms expire. Landscape Recovery should also provide management flexibility and DLUMG needs to remain abreast of these discussions.

It was identified that CS Higher Tier is too restrictive in terms of affording the flexibility often needed to target management for heritage. Can we create this flexibility for heritage and wider outcomes or not? This was discussed with Mike Rowe of Defra in October 2025.

The importance of the group's review of monitoring was highlighted, with a question posed as to whether this could be accelerated ahead of the next meeting. A Project Brief to cover this had been drafted and agreed subject to some minor, final changes, but this work will be priced and delivered from spring onwards.

Action: Raise the issue of flexibility on moorland stocking rates again with Defra. Use case-study examples

5. Update on LUF baseline mapping and next steps

John Howell explained that Exeter University has completed the stage one baseline / land capability mapping and a meeting with the LUF work-stream team and the University is planned for 26th February for first feedback. The work has been done in good time and at reasonable cost (£6,230 net) plus certain licence fees, the quantum of which will be known once we determine the brief for stage two of the work.

A set of draft maps in pdf format will be available at the next DLUMG for comments. John will commence work on a scoping paper to set out a suggested framework through which to take forward the stage two, opportunities mapping work. This will be shared with the LUF work-stream and then the wider DLUMG on 30th March.

A paper setting out a draft Project Brief for advancing the nature recovery opportunities mapping had been shared and agreed by the group. Tom had made some minor changes to this to reflect group feedback which NE would like time to reflect on before the paper is finalised.

Action: NE to send comments on nature opportunities mapping to Tom

6. Discussion of nature principles paper

This paper had been re-structured and edited to provide a balance between clear and impactful outcomes for nature and a summary of practical land and grazing management actions to help achieve delivery.

Some very helpful comments had been received before the meeting, with the majority from one source.

A useful discussion took place about what the paper was striving to achieve. Many felt it important to blend nature 'vision' with 'management action' to aid the structuring of the trials and the discussions on grazing. The paper needs to empower site level conversations and the right management for a suite of public goods. It also needs to inform the nature opportunities mapping work.

There was an element of division between some of those involved in the drafting of the original paper in the nature work-stream group, the balance of that group, and the wider

DLUMG in relation to which paper was most effective. It was proposed that the DLUMG records that the first draft paper on nature principles produced by the nature recovery work-stream was endorsed by the majority of that group, although the revised draft discussed at this meeting was supported by the majority when put to DLUMG, so this paper would stand, subject to the comments from the RSPB representative being brought in and some suggested changes to the introduction to create greater strength of impact to the reader relating to positive nature enhancement.

7. Common standards monitoring – next steps

A Project Brief had been developed previously, shared for comment via email and in principle, was agreed. NE wished to make some minor additional comments and it was agreed Tom would finalise this with them and progress for pricing.

Andy Nesbit, Deputy Director for Monitoring at NE will kindly support this work for NE.

Action: NE to send comments to Tom

8. Trials update

Tom updated on the development of the trials work in the context of the schedule that had been circulated.

Two, whole common, landscape scale trials are being further developed (Throwleigh and South Tawton), with an additional, small whole in the East Dartmoor Landscape Recovery. Spitchwick common, where a number of individual ideas have come forward from commoners to trial methods of bracken management have potential to combine with a trial looking at the relation between these and grazing management / distribution.

A meeting is planned with commoners in March to gauge whether there is interest in creating something applicable to the wider common that also connects with the Central Dartmoor Landscape Recovery proposals.

Three Molinia trials targeted at gathering robust scientific data to support a range of known management interventions through policy are proposed at Harford common, Lydford and Lakehead newtake.

There are seven case-study reviews of previous and current site management work on Dartmoor underway via Adrian Colston, from which the project will glean some useful information on stocking levels, habitat management and governance.

Discussions are underway with Digg and Co who helped develop the Central Dartmoor / Duchy Vision, about them leading development of the landscape scale trials, with grazing plans being developed with commoners linked to the delivery of a range of outcomes including nature. The story of delivery through the grazing year can then be communicated with the lessons learned. Digg and Co have in-house ecologists who can develop a monitoring plan, which all agreed, must be robust.

Adrian Colston, Andy Byfield and hopefully, Sarah Jennings will support the smaller trials, with Adrian primarily focussed on the case-studies.

It was recommended that Adrian's work from the Forest relevant to the management of Premier Archaeological Landscapes is utilised.

There was support from the group for the approach to the trials. Key summary feedback points were;

- Can we assess commoners' understanding of the management outcomes?
- We must reflect on existing HLS term so we avoid double funding and indeed so we recognise what is happening already, why and the stocking rates / types
- The Trials Oversight Group, which includes a representation from all DLUMG stakeholders should be empowered to deliver the trials, reporting back to DLUMG where needed, via the group Chair
- We need to support commoners to engage and trust their judgement to encourage adaptive management
- Make good use of other, non DLUMG sources of funding
- Ensure all our monitoring, whether 'experimental' linked to interventionist work, or 'systems-based' across a whole common, is robust.
- There is need for a number of SSSI consents for trial related work which need to be accelerated if they are to be processed in time via NE and the RPA

Tom explained there is now a need to consider what economic analysis the DLUMG attaches to this work. Costings for specific interventions can be quite easily gathered to inform future payment rates. A farm systems based economic assessment of current and adapted management needs greater input and it was suggested that a representative sample is taken of some of the farms involved in the landscape scale trials.

Actions: Digg and Co brief to be shared once available

Tom Stratton and Janet Dwyer to further discussions on economics with the grazing group as needed.

Trial consents to be developed and landowners' consents secured

Monitoring focussed discussion linked to trials to be progressed with Andy Nesbit at NE

9. Evidence reviews

Several people questioned the merits of conducting specific literature reviews on swaling, gorse and bracken management – and also the impacts of Heather Beetle.

After discussion, it was concluded that a structured workshop style session on swaling would be helpful. It is a legally consented activity and the DLUMG is not tasked with deciding whether it is right or wrong however, the principles on which its use can or cannot be supported would be helpful to guide the future management of Dartmoor.

Tom proposed that a range of speakers are identified who could attend a meeting in late spring, to inspire a discussion, from which a set of management guidance principles from DLUMG could be produced. This was supported.

It was felt that the question of the increase in bracken and gorse extent could be picked in the LUF and Adrian Colston's vegetation mapping and the practical techniques for management could be compiled from existing knowledge / data.

A conclusion on the approach to Heather Beetle was not recorded. It remains an issue on Dartmoor.

NE guided the group to a review of literature that they did and suggested this is reflected on.

Actions: Project management team to review NE work on Heather Beetle and feed back

Project team to suggest speakers and structure for swaling discussion

Project team to ensure bracken and gorse work picked up in wider project outputs

10. Uptick Project

David Atwell from the Hill Farm Project leads this work looking at Tick borne disease affecting both animal and human health. Securing the funding for this work was a significant achievement and it is very much the intention that the DLUMG trials help with delivery. David will give an update at a subsequent meeting.

11. Communications, costed work-plan and proposed visit to the New Forest

These items were deferred until the next meeting due to lack of time. Tom mentioned there is an opportunity to visit the New Forest to meet Forestry England staff and discuss heathland management, agri-environment delivery and governance.

12. Next Meeting

Now 30th March at 1pm. Venue Buckfast Abbey