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| <u>Committee and Date</u><br>Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership<br><br>14 <sup>th</sup> November 2017 | <u>Item</u><br><br><b>5</b> |
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## **'OUR COMMON CAUSE' – UPLAND COMMONS PROJECT**

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### **Summary**

This paper updates members about the Upland Commons project which we are part of, which is just starting after stage 1 approval by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The project is led by the Foundation for Common Land, a small national organisation, and will work on selected commons on Dartmoor, the Lake District, Shropshire Hills and Yorkshire Dales. There is an emphasis on sharing experience between the areas, along with some national outputs.

### **Recommendation**

The Partnership is recommended to note and comment on the project's activities.

### **Background**

Project summary (from HLF funding application)

At the heart of England's most loved and visited places are Commons managed by commoners' traditional husbandry systems. Our project will enhance the centuries-old heritage of upland commons in four of England's most significant cultural landscapes.

The natural and cultural heritage of commons has declined and Brexit threatens the viability of commoning and the value of commons to society. We address these threats under three aims:

- 'Enabling Collaborative Management',
- 'Reconnecting People with Commons' and
- 'Improving Public Benefits':

We plan to collectively build skills, trial practical conservation, and through learning and volunteering, increase and celebrate ancient cultural practices and environmental assets.

Our legacy will be more people enjoying and understanding commons and communities empowered to safeguard the heritage of commons.

A national approach is essential to create bridges of learning between dispersed sites with similar characteristics. Outcomes will be significantly greater and enduring than through individual projects.

## What the project will do

'Our Common Cause' will conserve and enhance the heritage of commons and commoning in upland England. It will directly improve the management of almost 30,000ha of upland common and with it the delivery of a wide range of ecosystems services. It will share learning and best practice between commoners, many of whom live in isolated rural communities with limited opportunity to communicate with commoners in other areas. Furthermore it will connect low young people from low income households with commons so that their heritage is enjoyed by wider audiences.

We have identified three thematic aims:

- A) Enabling Collaborative Management
- B) Reconnecting People with Commons
- C) Improving Public Benefits

We will work on at least 12 commons across Dartmoor, the Lake District, Shropshire Hills and Yorkshire Dales. This trans-regional approach is essential due to the fragmented nature of commons across England and their location in remote rural areas with socially and economically marginal communities. Although disparate geographically, the commons selected share many attributes and issues; these include:

- governance models – voluntary commons associations
- support mechanisms – Higher Level Stewardship, Basic Payment Scheme
- designation – many are SSSIs or SACs and therefore subject to environmental legislation and restrictions
- public use – all commons have open access
- economically marginal – upland farms with common land support the lowest net farm incomes in the agricultural sector
- considerable uncertainty in the light of Brexit

Consequently, there is an urgent need to work at both national and local levels. The project will promote the sharing of best practice between commons and areas, to build capacity and increase capability. There will also be considerable focus on increasing understanding of the cultural, environmental and historic significance of the selected commons, and engaging local people through events and training, to strengthen the sense of local pride and ownership of commons. Cross regional working will be strengthened by appointing staff to lead on specific strands of the project and work closely with colleagues elsewhere to share best practice.

The project builds on the work and findings of the "Better Outcomes" study during 2014. This identified a strong need to increase mutual understanding between commoners and stakeholders at both local and national level to resolve conflict and agree coherent and connected objectives that will deliver better outcomes for commons, commoning and the environment. The project will facilitate knowledge exchange between parties with a stake in commons, thereby improving understanding, mutual respect and the effectiveness of communication.

The two year development stage of the project (Nov 2017 – Oct 2019) will carry out some vital foundation work in the identification and agreement of this common ground. It will:

- undertake detailed audits of the environmental and cultural assets of each common

- explore the importance of social and cultural drivers within the commoning communities of two of the project areas,
- develop a vision and action plan for the selected commons
- provide familiarisation days for policy makers
- establish a Charter for Common Land Management between the project partners  
Further information about these is contained in question 5a. The delivery stage will build on the information and collaboration established during development
- develop a package to support the delivery of the John Muir Award with a focus on common land and commoning to ensure a wider section of society understands and enjoys commons.

Discussions with commoners, NGOs and public bodies across all four areas has identified the following indicative project proposals for the three year Delivery phase (2020-2022). These have been grouped as follows into the three themes described above. (The Better Outcomes study provided evidence that outputs delivered under theme C are dependent on successful work under themes A and B).

#### **A) ENABLING COLLABORATIVE MANAGEMENT**

- Rolling out the visioning process to at least 16 more commons across the four areas
- Creating a hub (web based) and organising regional commoners “gatherers” to share learning and experience and disseminate best practice
- Sharing learning on the outcomes approach across the areas
- Identifying and supporting at least 12 commons’ ambassadors
- Providing support and training to at least 100 conservationists about commoners, commons, game sports and upland agriculture
- Creating electronic registers for at least 20 more Common land units

#### **B) RECONNECTING PEOPLE WITH COMMONS**

- Establishing a programme of locally relevant events and activities across commons including walks and talks, and, re-establishing shepherds’ meets that address 21st century issues
- Enabling Delivery of the John Muir Award focusing on commons and commoning to 480 young people
- Two audiences will be engaged, i) those that offer residential courses to people from deprived areas and ii) schools and youth groups from deprived wards within day travel of the area
- Producing interpretive material to increase understanding of commoning and commons, and the role they play in the provision of public goods and services
- Using oral history to explore commoning traditions and landscape change
- Establishing 8 volunteer groups to carry out a range of conservation and management activities with commoners on commons
- Providing training and mentoring for 16 new entrants or young commoners
- Establishing an 18 month, level 2 apprenticeship scheme for 8 aspiring commoners

### C) IMPROVING PUBLIC BENEFITS

The details of projects included in theme C will flow from the visioning exercises and management plans produced during development:

- CARBON AND WATER STORAGE: Piloting and rolling out innovative approaches to peat and water conservation on blanket bogs and wetland
- HISTORIC: Conserving 36 archaeological features on the commons
- HISTORIC: Conserving 15 historic utilitarian features associated with commoning, e.g. sheepfolds and pounds
- ACCESS: Improving and managing access in 40 priority locations through strategic physical improvements, bracken control and tick management
- BIODIVERSITY: Conserving flagship species and habitats, at key sites, for example ring ouzel, pearl-bordered fritillary and blanket bog
- CULTURAL: Carrying out 24 small scale improvements to assist shepherding and gathering, for example to stock handling pens, gates or to control bracken impeding gathers
- Providing 24 training courses in habitat and archaeological site monitoring to commoners and local residents

#### Local delivery

In the Shropshire Hills we have already convened an area group of stakeholders from various commons. The three main commons the project will work with are the Long Mynd, Clee Liberty and the Stiperstones, though there will be opportunities to involve people from other commons if they wish. The AONB Partnership will be contracted to provide the services of Cath Landles from the AONB team as the Area Facilitator for the Shropshire Hills area.

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| <b>List of Background Papers</b><br>Foundation for Common Land: <a href="http://www.foundationforcommonland.org.uk/news/546-our-common-cause-our-upland-commons">http://www.foundationforcommonland.org.uk/news/546-our-common-cause-our-upland-commons</a> . |
| <b>Human Rights Act Appraisal</b><br>The information in this report is compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998.   |
| <b>Environmental Appraisal</b><br>The recommendation in this paper will contribute to the conservation of protected landscapes.   |
| <b>Risk Management Appraisal</b><br>Risk management has been appraised as part of the considerations of this report.  |
| <b>Community / Consultations Appraisal</b><br>The topics raised in this paper have been the subject of earlier consultations with Partnership members.  |
| <b>Appendices</b><br>None   |