

Dame Angela Eagle DBE MP
Minister of State for Food Security and Rural Affairs

By email: PS.Angela.Eagle@defra.gov.uk

15 April 2026

Dear Dame Angela,

Common Land and Commoners excluded from ELM Schemes

The New Forest Association is a conservation charity formed in 1867 with the purpose of protecting and conserving the New Forest – the legal title to which you hold on behalf of the nation. It is acknowledged by all that centuries of traditional stock grazing by commoners has shaped the New Forest we know today. Indeed, commoning continues to play a vital role in securing the renowned biodiversity of the New Forest which, though one of the smaller national parks, contains at 54% the highest proportion of protected landscapes (SSSIs, SACs & SPAs) as well as the highest density of visitors at over 15million day visits per year.

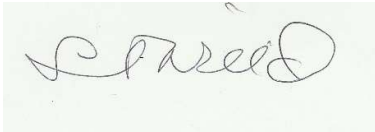
It is thus most troubling to learn that no common land will be able to enter Sustainable Farming Incentive or Countryside Stewardship Scheme Higher Tier agreements in 2026. Furthermore, that your department cannot guarantee there will be access in 2027. We understand that this is simply because the computer software that underpins the Rural Payments Agency cannot cope with the large field parcels that typically make up commons.

Joining other leading environmental bodies, we are writing to ask you to request the Rural Payments Agency to introduce a manual system for issuing and managing common land agreements. We understand other Environmental Land Management Schemes have successfully been implemented in this way and that given the number of likely applications and with the collective management of many commons, it should be feasible and affordable.

It is inequitable that the marginal farm businesses that manage this and other iconic commons, that comprise 21% of England's SSSIs, are being excluded from new schemes whilst existing schemes from which they benefit have been (BPS payments) or are being phased out (HLS payments). There is huge energy and interest by the New

Forest commoners, the Verderers of the New Forest, Forestry England, as your land manager, and the New Forest National Park Authority to do more for nature recovery and climate resilience yet they are being prevented by the 'computer saying no'.

Yours sincerely,



Sarah Nield,
Chair of the New Forest Association

cc

Sir Julian Lewis, MP for New Forest East,

Sir Desmond Swayne, MP for New Forest West

Caroline Nokes MP for Romsey and Southampton North

Barry Gardiner, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on National Parks and National Landscapes