

Lyndsey Stride's Presentment on the A31 Fire to the Verderers' Court September 2026

Good morning Official Verderer, Verderers and members of the public,
My name is Lyndsey Stride, I am a New Forest commoner and resident of Emery Down.

My presentment today regards the Fire on the A31 and the subsequent media storm that ensued.

The Fire

On the afternoon of Sunday the 9th August my husband Robert and I were checking our ponies south of the A31. At approximately 5.30pm we spotted smoke from a vehicle fire and called the Fire Brigade, informing them that there was both a vehicle fire and that the fire was travelling at speed down the central reservation in the dense gorse. You could clearly see the fire jumping 20 yds at a time.

We could see that vehicles were trapped by the flames. As the fire advanced towards the stationary traffic, periodically we could see cars driving at speed through the burning gorse, at one point a large tanker had no choice but to drive through. We travelled quickly to Backley Pound and arrived at the same time as the first police vehicle. Our knowledge of the area, plus the support of Philip and Jehanna Stride, enabled us to support the evacuation of cars from the A31, something that felt like ten minutes but which took nearly an hour. It is my strong belief that people's lives were in danger that day. A van and horse box went through, it's driver obviously relieved to be away from the flames.

We then watched for many hours as the fire slowly progressed through the heathland and eventually into Bratley Wood and Soldiers Bog. It was clear that both the previous winter's prescribed burns and the wetland significantly reduced the impact and passage of the fire and prevented it from getting into Oakley.

There wasn't a plan to follow for those of us on the ground. Local knowledge and skills was not valued until it was too late to make a significant difference. What felt like impossible and dangerous terrain for urban firefighters was an area which local keepers and Forest workers

knew intimately. Every ditch, bog, bank and tree was known to them. Yet FE protocol prevented the expert burning teams from assisting the Fire Service.

We cannot change what happened, but we can ensure the lessons are learned to protect the Forest and people's homes from future fires.

Communications

I was a child the last time a large fire engulfed the A31, a time when Facebook didn't exist. The ensuing media storm that followed the fire was perhaps even more impactful and also requires a full enquiry so that lessons can be learned.

There were no facts from trusted sources. No voice of reason or hope to dispel myths or calm fears. Instead there were doom laden headlines and click bait statements. The impact of this was felt by people both near and far:

- Poor communication about road closures left residents in Emery Down and Burley fearful that their homes were in danger from the fire, they were not.
- People were led to believe that the fire 'raged' for days and even weeks out of control. It did not.
- Visitors believed that a huge area of the New Forest had burned. It was less than 1%.
- The public were led to believe that this was ecological Armageddon, there has yet to be a full ecological survey published but experienced ecologists understand that fire is a part of the natural cycle of the Forest. Green shoots were pushing through the ground within days. In nature there are always winners and losers.
- Animal lovers were led to believe that the ponies were both starving and desperate for water. They were surrounded by hundreds of hectares of plentiful food and water.

The truth was ignored in favour of melodrama.

The consequences of the fire have revealed the complex interconnection between the economy, society, cultural heritage and the natural environment and wider lessons should be learned.

My first request of the Verderers is that you ensure there is a full, transparent multi agency enquiry into the Fire, taking into consideration the views of those on the ground as well as experts including the Fire Service, Police, FE staff including the experienced prescribed Burning Team and local ecologists. It is critical that important lessons are learned. To protect not just the flora and fauna of the Forest but people's homes and livelihoods.

My second request is that a coordinated Fire Management Plan which values local knowledge is created as a matter of urgency. Mitigation activity for the prevention of summer wildfires in 2027 will need to be carried out this winter to protect people's homes, keep roads open and create fire breaks to slow wildfires.

And finally, I would urge the Verderers, Forestry England, National Park Authority, CDA and Emergency Services to co-ordinate their communications so that timely, balanced, factually accurate information is shared in the event of an emergency. Communications should focus on the event and should NOT be used as an opportunity to raise organisational issues or champion individual organisations.

Sun Yzu, an Ancient Chinese General, Strategist and Philosopher said: 'Plan for what is difficult while it is easy, do what is great while it is small'

The climate is changing and we must prepare for it.

Additional Notes

1. Closure of the A31 for 2 weeks, one of the main routes from London to the West Country and the main route between Southampton and Bournemouth has had a significant economic impact, at an enormous cost to national and local business and the economy. This could and should be calculated.
2. The fire service was under resourced which constrained their ability to prepare and respond.
3. Fuel loads were excessively high on the A31. It was predictable that a significant fire could start in this location.

4. There were no planned evacuation routes and plans in place for the Police to use.
5. Local knowledge has value, the burning team leaders should be included in the planning process and should be involved in the event of a serious wildfire.
6. Forest management matters. Grazing, the cut and burn programme, particularly the prescribed burning carried out in the spring and wetland restoration are critical for the economy, society and nature.
7. Land owners, commoners and Fire and Rescue Services in Dartmoor, Mid Wales, North York Moors and Yorkshire already work in partnership and have Fire Management Plans in place or are developing them, including mapping fire breaks.
8. The Foundation for Common Land are hosting a knowledge exchange webinar on the 30th September on Creating Fire Management Plans on Common Land. This webinar will look closely at the collaborative approach to Fire Management using Dartmoor as an example.

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