

House of Commons: Written Statement (HCWS274)

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Written Statement made by: **Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Reynolds)** on 16 Jul 2026.

Recognising the value of Dartmoor's ponies

Today, I wish to update the House on the decisive action we are taking to secure the long-term future of Dartmoor's iconic pony populations through a package of new protections and financial support.

Dartmoor's pony populations and ELM schemes

Dartmoor's heritage rare breeds and semi-wild ponies are a much cherished part of Dartmoor's landscape and cultural heritage. They also play an important role in conserving protected environmental sites, including Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), on the moor. This government is committed to ensuring their numbers do not fall below current levels

From today, we are going beyond recommendation 27 of the Fursdon review of protected site management on Dartmoor in 2023 to delink ponies and cattle for the calculation of agri-environment scheme stocking rates. Dartmoor's ponies will be completely removed from stocking rate calculations in new Environmental Land Management (ELM) agreements, so that farmers do not face a choice between keeping ponies and maintaining sheep or cattle. Pony numbers will also be monitored across the moor to ensure they remain at least at current levels. As part of the overall grazing management approach on protected sites in Dartmoor, I have asked Natural England to only consider where existing populations of ponies graze, rather than their overall numbers.

New ELM agreements on Dartmoor will be negotiated on an individual basis, reflecting the needs of the sites they are managing. I want to make it clear though – by affirming our commitment to maintaining current pony populations on Dartmoor – that if any reductions in the existing pony populations were to occur, this will not release any capacity to increase levels of sheep (or cattle) grazing on the moor agreed under ELM schemes.

Dartmoor's resident ponies will continue to remain exempt from being included in any seasonal livestock removal requirements in the shepherding actions within Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) and Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier (CSHT) ELM scheme offers.

We also intend to introduce a separate pony supplement into SFI and CSHT scheme offers to ensure that there is no economic incentive to reduce pony populations as a result of participating in Defra schemes and provide additional support to allow ponies to continue their vital conservation grazing role on the moor.

We will also review the Native Breed actions in these schemes to see whether the approach could enhance support for 'at-risk' native breeds, working with interested parties.

Making a real change to the condition of protected sites on Dartmoor

Dartmoor is one of England's most important and distinctive landscapes, home to internationally important habitats, wildlife and SSSIs, but large parts of Dartmoor are in long-term ecological decline. Achieving the right balance of grazing is essential to supporting both nature recovery and the long-term future of the moor's farming communities.

There is broad agreement that grazing approaches on Dartmoor need to change to improve the condition of the valuable habitats found on Dartmoor. Defra remains committed to finding flexible and nuanced approaches to grazing on Dartmoor and to doing so through the work of the Dartmoor Land Use Management Group (DLUMG) set up following the Fursdon Review.

The DLUMG is bringing together a Land Use Framework for Dartmoor and undertaking trials to demonstrate what works to improve condition of its protected sites. Subject to agreement of a clear workplan for DLUMG work going forwards, I have asked the group:

- to help ensure that their trials complement projects under development on Dartmoor through Landscape Recovery. I want this work to help to build the evidence base, test adaptive grazing approaches and inform improvement of protected site management.
- to develop a Dartmoor-wide management framework that allows for approval of a whole Dartmoor set of grazing principles for ponies, cattle and sheep. This framework will take time to develop but I see it as essential to enabling improvements to the environmental condition of the moor so that future generations can enjoy the wide diversity of species and habitats Dartmoor offers.

Agreeing proposals for ELM agreements on Dartmoor

Finally, I want to ensure that ongoing discussions around Landscape Recovery projects, new CS Higher Tier and continuing Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agri-environment agreements on Dartmoor demonstrate an openness to flexible and adaptive approaches to grazing on the moor while we await the results of the DLUMG trials. With respect to ponies these discussions will also be conducted fully in line with the principles set out above.

Whilst we await results from the DLUMG trials, I have asked Natural England that any proposed changes to grazing on Dartmoor through ELM schemes should be approached sensitively. To support their negotiations, Defra will work closely with Natural England, with support from the DLUMG, to collectively agree:

- short term grazing management on Dartmoor under ELM schemes;
- any transitional approaches that might be required to bring existing stocking rate levels in expiring agreements to those required to support improvements in habitat condition under new CSHT agreements; and
- the evidence used to support grazing management, working with Defra's Chief Scientific Adviser and her team.

Conclusion

I believe the approach I have set out here will help us ensure that collectively we are able to agree a balanced approach to help improve management of protected sites on Dartmoor, maintain pony populations and to support farmers and commoners who play a vital role on Dartmoor's landscape.