

HLS Extensions on upland commons: gathering an evidence base from 27 case studies.

The data

DATA COLLECTION: information was collected using local contacts including Land agents, Chairs and Secretaries of Commoners' Associations. They were asked to fill in a template to allow comparability across commons.

LOCATION OF CASE STUDIES: Cumbria – 15; Durham – 2; Exmoor – 1; Dartmoor – 1; Northumberland – 2; North York Moors – 4; Yorkshire Dales – 2

DATE OF HLS EXPIRIES: 2018 – 4; 2019- 4; 2020 – 15; 2021 – 3; 2022 – 1

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: this is a smallish sample, but does cover small, medium, and large upland commons. While we may not be able to come to firm conclusions, **THESE CASES DO PROVIDE EVIDENCE AND AN INDICATION OF WHAT IS HAPPENING ON THE GROUND.**

The results

	Total	HLS Extension Given	HLS extensions Refused
HLS expiries	27	13 (48%)	14 (52%)

Just under 50% of these 10-year HLS agreements were deemed eligible for an extension.

WHAT DOES THIS SAY ABOUT THE INITIAL SCHEME DESIGN AND/ OR DELIVERY?

A DEEPER LOOK AT THE 13 HLS EXTENSIONS

- Only 2 rolled over with no changes
- 2 required the owners to stop heather burning
- 9 (69%) required significant reductions of between 25% -30% in the stocking rate before an extension would be given with reductions staged over 3-5 years

Once the HLS agreement was signed it was rare for a NE adviser to provide feedback/aftercare to the agreement holders on how the agreement was going. When it came to negotiating the extension, usually in year 10 of the agreement this was the first time they were told they were not meeting the set indicators.

Commoners reported their experience of negotiation the extension was generally fraught and stressful with only 2 reporting the process went smoothly.

Other issues causing friction:

- Despite the guideline, a technical assessment from the NE adviser was not always forthcoming, the ones we saw varied in level of detail and quality of data
- In general, insufficient time was allotted to work through the extension process in a measured way. In 3 cases NE started the process very late making it a stressful process

- Like-for like extensions are rare, graziers are expected to make big adjustments to their farming system over short time scale leaving commoners with the sense they are not being offered an extension but a new-short term scheme
- We found examples of contiguous commons where one was offered an extension the other refused, but unclear why the NE adviser's recommendation was different

A DEEPER LOOK AT THE 14 EXTENSIONS REFUSED

- 10 were offered Higher Tier Countryside Stewardship (HT CS), 9 had to make similar reductions in stocking rates to HLS extensions of between 25-30%. They received significant reductions in payments of around 25-40%. In effect they are delivering similar outputs to HLS with less money.
- 1 was given a 1-year extension to work up a new HT CS agreement
- 3 dropped out of schemes all together

SOME OTHER CONCERNS

Below is a list of concerns that arose in some areas, but not all:

- Commoners given little input in shaping new Higher Tier Countryside Agreements, or even asked about how they see the common
- NE only negotiated with the common landowners, with the graziers brought in at the end and expected to endorse the agreement
- Graziers expected to cut sheep numbers to take account of deer, even though deer are not hefted to the common and will roam large distances
- Cheviot sheep are being heavily penalised, with NE classing them as a lowland ewe, this reduces the number of sheep commoners can run on the common
- Where capital works are required some commoner's associations are having difficulties with cash flowing the work as they have to spend the money before being reimbursed and the scheme has stalled
- When challenged NE advisers can rarely provide comprehensive evidence for not recommending an HLS extension as funding for robust monitoring of schemes on commons has not been forthcoming over the lifetime of the scheme
- New/young graziers are being squeezed out of schemes when overall stocking rates are being reduced.

CONCLUSIONS

- We have found significant disparities in how NE staff are applying the rules and conditions for Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) Extensions on commons within and between different parts of England
- Word gets round the commoning community and this lack of consistency is destroying trust in the professionalism and impartiality of NE's staff.
- Poor previous experience of agri-environment schemes is a huge barrier to participation in new schemes
- Experience to date shows that once commons drop out of schemes it is difficult to get them back into schemes
- If the government's Agricultural Transition Plan is to be successful, one way forward is to look after current agri-environment agreement holders, so they have a smooth, clear and satisfactory journey to the new schemes on offer.

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Contact viv@cumbriacommoners.org.uk