

LACK OF ANY AUDITS

FOR COMPLETED ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP AGREEMENTS



1.1 Although applicable to various types of agri-environmental schemes across the UK, this file specifically concerns an Entry Level and Higher Level Stewardship Agreement [#AG00260864] made between a local farmer and Natural England. It ran from 1st August 2007 until 31st July 2017 and covered Boswens and Carnyorth Commons in the Land's End Peninsula [West Penwith, Cornwall].

1.2 In July 2015 the local action group, Save Penwith Moors, asked Natural England whether an audit by Natural England or an independent body would be carried out for the Agreement after it ends “to assess whether the money spent (totalling at least £200,000) has been satisfactorily ‘invested’.”¹

1.3 On 16th September 2016 we again asked Natural England if a ‘completion’ detailed independent survey or audit would be carried out once the Agreement finished, in summer 2017, to assess whether the ‘indicators of success’ had been met, and if this would be made available to the public? The response² was that:

“Natural England has no plans to commission an independent survey in respect of the indicators of success for individual agreements.”

¹ 3rd July 2015 to Natural England Lead Adviser, Land Management and Conservation; Cornwall, Devon & Isles of Scilly Area Team

² 13th October 2016 from Natural England Senior Adviser – Access to Information

1.4 It was also stated that Natural England had made eleven agreement delivery site visits between October 2010 and April 2016, and that these indicated that management of lowland heath prescriptions for Carnyorth Common had been followed and satisfactory progress was being made towards achieving the Indicators of Success.

1.5 Once the Agreement ended, Save Penwith Moors made a Freedom of Information request to Natural England and received the following response [Request no 3954 dated 31st August 2017].

You asked for:

1. Could you confirm whether an audit will shortly be carried out to determine whether the Indicators of Success have been met?

Natural England does not have any plans to carry out an audit to determine whether the Indicators of Success have been met.

It was also confirmed that the amount paid to date under this Agreement was £257,698.70.

‘PUBLIC MONEY FOR PUBLIC GOODS’

2.1 We wholeheartedly agree with the contemporary mantra of ‘public money for public goods’ [i.e. A public good being an item consumed by society as a whole and not necessarily by an individual consumer].

2.2 In written evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee in 2016,³ Natural England indicated that the common understanding of public goods includes our natural air, soil, water, ecological and landscape assets and the benefits that flow from them. Other evidence submitted by the Wildlife and Countryside Link, representing more than 8 million people through 45 voluntary organisations, specifically highlighted public goods as the products that the market cannot or will not pay for, such as sustainable water and soil management, natural flood management, enhancement and connectivity of wildlife habitat, **improving public access** (*my emphasis*), protecting and enhancing landscape character and heritage, and achieving high animal welfare standards.

2.3 With regard to improving public access, we consider that significant financial cut-backs of council funding has led to an inability for them to maintain public rights of way to a satisfactory condition. We therefore believe that all new agri-environmental agreements should include a mandatory requirement for agreement holders to keep all public rights of way on their land (footpaths, bridleways and byways) clear of all obstructions and in a walkable/riding condition, with all stiles and gates maintained by them in a good and safe condition. This would allow local authorities to concentrate resources on those public rights of way that do not fall within the area of an agri-agreement.

³ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmenvaud/599/599.pdf>

CONCLUSION

3.1 A new 10 year Countryside Stewardship Agreement in West Cornwall,⁴ with an anticipated total cost of almost £90,000 and covering nearly 22 hectares, has a number of ‘aims’ and ‘indicators of success’ for the various management options but with a caveat that they are ‘not binding’. Presumably this means that the agreement holder does not actually have to achieve – or even attempt to achieve – these stipulations but will still receive payment. Since these agreements will be implemented throughout the country – at considerable cost – we suggest this is another reason why an audit at the end of agreements should be a mandatory requirement.

3.2 We find it astonishing that the expenditure on agri-environmental schemes costing many millions of pounds across the country should remain unaccountable and untested for successes and failures, particularly in this prolonged period of austerity and public service cuts. If individual agreements were **independently** audited when they came to an end then lessons could be learnt and applied to other ‘live’ or future agreements. This, we consider, would be in the public interest – after all, it is public money (UK and EU) that goes towards funding these schemes.

3.3 We hope that issues of audits and footpath maintenance will be seriously considered and made mandatory for all future agri-environmental agreements [Countryside Stewardship, etc].

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⁴ Countryside Stewardship Agreement Document; Agreement Name: Little Sellan; Agreement Number: AG00706480; Agreement Start Date 01/01/2017; Agreement End Date 31/12/2026