

I am very privileged to be invited to the AGM of the OSS, the oldest, and in my opinion, the most effective voluntary body in Britain. I'll talk more about that later.

I was appointed as Natural England's principal specialist on commons on the 1st April 2014. This is a new post, created because Natural England recognises that commons are a unique resource, one which we should all cherish, and it was recognised that Natural England needed more central expertise to improve how we work on commons.

Previously I have worked in Natural England on other aspects of access, at the Countryside Agency I led on CAP reform, I was Director of Wildlife and Countryside Link for two years and prior to that I lectured to undergraduates on Rural Policy, including access at Bishop Burton College in East Yorkshire.

I thought it would be useful to provide you with an update with what is happening around commons and access in Natural England in the short term.

We are making some changes. We want to become better at what we do, and we will that by doing three things differently:

- We will be more participatory, welcoming the views and experience of stakeholders, not just those with common rights but others too.
- We want to learn from where we have made mistakes so we can do a better job next time. Using the experience of systems engineering we want to learn from errors, find out why they happened and fix the system. So please hold us to account, let us know what you think, it will help us to do better, and;
- To support local officers we now have a small central team whom they can ask for help and we encourage them to do so. We are also doing lots more training on the technical aspects of commons and access and in engagement in the run up to the new stewardship scheme which opens in 2015.

We know that some people are disappointed that we have not used our powers under Commons Act 2006 s46, to stop unauthorised agricultural activity. This is because we have not yet had a case to which it applies. We are currently considering legal action on commons where action might be necessary, but we will probably bring action under different legislation. Defra's guidance on the use of s46 is clear: the s46 power is confined to unauthorised agricultural activities and is a power of last resort, but we have not yet had such a case.

We are also considering the circumstances in which we might use powers under Commons Act 2006 s41, works without consent. We might pursue an action in the limited circumstances where Natural England has been previously involved but where we have been unable to get the land manager to put things right by other means.

As Part 1 of the Commons Act 2006, relating to the registration of commons, is rolled out, our role is not likely to be significant. Where we have evidence relating to a claim we will provide it, but in general we don't hold primary evidence except for our own National Nature Reserve estate. The registration of a common and SSSI designation is compatible so this designation will not impact upon commons registration.

Most members of the Open Spaces Society are probably aware of Natural England's programme to dedicate access rights on foot and some higher rights in perpetuity on National Nature Reserves. This includes sites which have access under the Law of Property Act 1925 s193, or the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 already. We think that this programme and the subsequent management of sites provides a useful demonstration of how it is possible to manage access alongside nature conservation and we encourage others to consider dedicating their land too.

In the longer term there are some big challenges on commons. Commons are places which are unique, where there is public access, superb landscapes, often wonderful nature, historic features and where there is (or used to be) a unique bond between a community and its place. I think it's time to look at how we support those three pillars of sustainability: economy, society and the environment. How do we rebuild or strengthen those links between community and place? This needs to be a joint endeavour, where all interests that benefit from good management of commons are participants. So I'm looking to work with partners to explore how commons can be managed and funded for the benefit of everyone. Getting this right will be a major challenge.

In the spirit of joint working I'd like to suggest that there are some things which the society might consider looking at, for instance the future ownership of local authority commons, as local authorities look at alternative ways of managing local commons what might be the impacts of this and how can negative impacts be avoided?

Finally, why do I think the society is the most effective voluntary body in Britain? It is because this society has such an impressive track record: it was this society that campaigned to protect commons in the 19th Century; it was this society that led to the establishment of the National Trust to hold land in perpetuity; and, it is this society that continues to act locally and nationally to protect commons and public rights of access over 150 years after it was founded.

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