



National Audit Office

Comptroller and Auditor General
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Rt. Hon. Sir Desmond Swayne TD MP
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Helping the nation spend wisely

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Reference GF/1639/16
Date 28 October 2016

Dear Sir Desmond,

NEW FOREST HIGHER LEVEL STEWARDSHIP SCHEME

Thank you for your letter raising your concerns over how EU funding under the Higher Level Stewardship scheme has been administered by Natural England for a partnership between the New Forest Verderers, the New Forest National Park Authority and the Forestry Commission. Your correspondence raised particular concerns regarding the eligibility of this partnership arrangement to receive this funding, as well as the quality of the work performed on wetland restorations, which is a requirement within the Higher Level Stewardship scheme agreement.


I have asked my team with responsibility for the audit of Natural England to review the information you have provided. They have identified two areas that we will examine further:

- whether this arrangement gives rise to any issues of dual funding given the Forestry Commission's existing statutory obligations for which it already receives government funding; and
- the procedures in place to ensure that work performed under the HLS scheme is appropriately controlled and monitored.

Given Natural England's role as the scheme administrator we will initially make enquiries with them to understand the role they perform in this specific scheme, ascertain how they ensure the scheme meets the requirements attached to this funding, including any issues around dual funding, and the oversight they perform on the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship scheme.

Due to the complex nature of the funding and administrative arrangements surrounding the delivery of the Higher Level Stewardship scheme, as well as the number of stakeholders involved, we will widen our enquiries to include relevant parties as required.

We will provide you with an update on progress of our work by 30 November 2016.


AMYAS C E MORSE