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Professor John Shepherd CBE FRS
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Dear Professor Shepherd

NEW FOREST HIGHER LEVEL STEWARDSHIP SCHEME

I am writing to provide you with an update in response to your letter of 20 November 2016 to the Comptroller and Auditor General, concerning the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme and the related correspondence with the Rt. Hon. Sir Desmond Swayne.

Our enquiries have focussed on the eligibility of the partnership between the New Forest Verderers, the New Forest National Park Authority and the Forestry Commission to receive HLS funding; and also to assess the controls established to consider the quality of the work performed under this scheme.

My team, which is responsible for the audit of Natural England, are now concluding their enquiries into whether there is any dual funding present in this arrangement, and are awaiting final confirmation from all parties involved before making their final conclusion.

In relation to the monitoring of works performed under the HLS agreement, my team has now received responses from Natural England in relation to a number of questions pertaining to the queries raised by the Rt. Hon. Sir Desmond Swayne. They are now reviewing these and requesting further supporting documents to substantiate the actions taken and to make an assessment of the measures taken by Natural England to satisfy themselves with regard to the quality of the works.

We have committed to provide the Rt. Hon. Sir Desmond Swayne with a further update on progress by 17 February 2017.

Yours sincerely

PP Damian Brewitt
Director, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs