

PRESS STATEMENT – HORSES/PONIES ON BARNHAM CROSS COMMON

Following a Full Council Meeting that took place on Tuesday 30 June 2015 a decision was reached by Thetford Town Council to remove horses and ponies that have been illegally grazing Barnham Cross Common. Owners will be instructed to remove the horses or risk the horses being seized.

It was pointed out to Councillors that, at present it was not possible to ensure either the safety of the horses or the safety of the public who may be harmed as a direct result of horses coming loose from tethers. In order to issue a licence to graze to owners of these horses/ponies, or any other livestock owners, the Council must be sure that, as landowners, they are promoting good and safe practice. With no fencing currently in place this element could therefore not be guaranteed at present. To gain agreement to install fencing on Common land will require Secretary of State approval.

The current unauthorised practice of grazing tethered horses on the common does not adhere to the Defra Code of Practice for the Welfare of Horses, Ponies, Donkeys and their Hybrids 2009. Amongst other things this code prescribes that a site should not be used without the written permission of the landowner and should not be crossed by any public right of way.

This Common is a 'Site of Special Scientific Interest'. The Town Council has a duty under Section 28G of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) to take reasonable steps to further the conservation and enhancement of the features for which the site is of special scientific interest. In order to do this The Council has entered into an Environmental Stewardship Agreement with Natural England which will fund future management of the site to benefit its special interest. There is potential for the withdrawal of such funding if the Council is unable to control grazing by tethered horses which are on the site without permission. Without this funding the future maintenance of the Common will be borne by the Council and this cost will have to be passed on to residents of Thetford via their Council Tax.

The Council stated that the intention of these future works will eventually see the Common fenced (under consent) so as to allow for suitable controlled grazing of the land. These intentions may therefore allow for grazing licences to be issued at some point in the future, but this would be for limited periods, carried out at specific times of the year. Owners would be required to demonstrate alternative arrangements for grazing for those periods where grazing of the Common is deemed detrimental.

Owners of the horses/ponies on the Common have subsequently been instructed to remove their animals from the Common by Monday 13th July 2015. If this is not accomplished then the Sheriff's Office will be instructed to issue a 96 hour notice of seizure in accordance with the Control of Horses Act 2015. If they are not claimed within this 96 hour period the Sheriff's Office will be given instruction to sell or dispose of the horses.

The Council has previously offered assistance to Mr Wilson (one of the owners) in securing a place for his horses/ponies at the Hillside Animal Sanctuary, Frettenham. Should anyone be able to offer potential grazing sites for the remaining horses then the Town Council would be happy to pass on details of this to the respective owners of the horses/ponies.

It should be clearly understood that there are no specific "Commoner's rights" registered to this common, and that other users of the common have voiced complaint with regard to the siting of horses, to interruption of free passage, and to the damage being caused to the protected species.