



## Research summary 12: Morecambe Bay Local Grazing Scheme

‘The Morecambe Bay Local Grazing Scheme plays a vital role in the conservation and management of a range of important sites in the Northwest and any change in the way it is run must ensure that none of these benefits are lost.’

### Key messages

- The Morecambe Bay Local Grazing Scheme<sup>1</sup> brings crucial conservation, social and economic benefits to a variety of environmentally sensitive sites.
- The current way of managing the scheme - where an independent grazier undertakes the bulk of the practical work on behalf of a number of landowners and conservation bodies – is the best way to ensure the benefits continue.
- There is scope to increase the amount of land covered by the scheme.
- More revenue could be raised from the grazed land through the sale of conservation grade meat; the challenge will be to put this on a business footing.

### The context

**Local grazing schemes** have evolved in response to a trend of grazing being abandoned in **marginal farming areas**. For a variety of reasons, these areas are often of great value and this value may depend on the land being grazed appropriately.

The most common type of grazing schemes are as follows:

- A ‘flying herd’ is created and moved to sites in need of grazing;
- A matching service is set up, putting people with stock in touch with people who have sites in need of grazing;
- The herd is owned by a local wildlife trust which uses it to graze its own sites and possibly some others;
- Graziers and landowners are offered an advisory service that helps them manage their stock to achieve conservation objectives.

The Morecambe Bay scheme has developed in the context of increasing demand for such schemes, although it does not fit any of these models. Its animals graze more than 1,000 hectares of land across 70 sites in north Lancashire, south Cumbria and the Yorkshire Dales. The bulk of the land is recognised to be of great environmental significance and includes Sites of Special

Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Special Areas of Conservation, National Nature Reserves, National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Around 70 per cent is in severely disadvantaged areas.

The land is owned by a mixture of private, public and voluntary sector bodies under a variety of letting arrangements that have developed since the scheme started in 1994. All the land is farmed organically. The cows are all of traditional breed, with some being owned by landowners and others by the grazier, who also owns a small flock of Hebridean sheep.

A **review** of the scheme was commissioned by a consortium of conservation bodies because the current grazier announced that he wanted to reduce his involvement. Cumbria Wildlife Trust appointed Asken Ltd to undertake the review and funding came from Natural Economy Northwest.

### The findings

The review reported a **wide range of benefits** that flow out of local grazing schemes generally. Chief among these is the effect on conservation. Appropriate grazing ensures that important open habitats of conservation value are maintained. Grazing also ensures diversity in the landscape and protects archaeological features that might otherwise become overgrown. Additional benefits relate to job creation, public access and agriculture.

Local grazing schemes are seen as essential where – as is the case at Morecambe Bay – the sites are small, outside the agricultural system and owned by conservation groups rather than farmers.

The review undertook to establish the effectiveness of the Morecambe Bay scheme. Interviews with key partners and landowners suggested very **high levels of satisfaction**. Similarly, research into the condition of the SSSIs being grazed suggested a consistently high quality.

With the current grazier planning to reduce his time input, four possible options for the future were investigated.

These were:

1. One of the current conservation organisations to take over responsibility for the grazing and to manage it with its own staff;
2. The current organisations to assume collective responsibility for the project, owning and managing it on a shared basis;
3. Another independent grazier to take over the initiative;
4. To let all the grazing on a commercial basis to whichever independent graziers presented themselves.

To facilitate a comparison between the options, the researchers calculated the 'baseline position' for the project in 2012 – the year of the changeover – in terms of income, costs and carbon footprint. For each option, a risk assessment and cost analysis was carried out and the views of the current grazier sought.

It was felt that the first and second options would make the organisation **significantly more complex**, moving it from a relatively low-cost operation that has built up over many years, to a more formally structured company. The fourth option was considered a 'worst case scenario', resulting in fragmentation of the grazing scheme and reversing 'the synergy that has been built up over the years'.

The review also explored other possible variations. These were: increasing the area grazed and the number of cattle on it; changing the mix of cattle; setting up a Lookers scheme (whereby volunteers are trained to monitor the condition of the cattle and the land); and developing a premium market for the meat produced from the scheme. While each option offers scope to improve financial returns, there is a danger that extra burdens on the management could jeopardise the ability to provide the service required by the partners.

The options and variants were discussed by the lead partners and it was agreed that an approach close to option 3 would work best, and that it should be up to the grazier to decide which, if any, of the variants to pursue.

## The challenge

The lead partners need to proceed apace with the process of appointing a new grazier. The review includes a **timetable** for this and other necessary actions.

Because of the unusual circumstances surrounding the letting of land under the Morecambe Bay scheme, the review recommends that applicants should be provided with information about the projected financial returns to be gained.

The review also includes recommendations for the recruitment process, suggesting that the new grazier should have:

- proven stockmanship;
- a willingness to learn and adopt conservation grazing management skills;
- a willingness to commit to the scheme full-time and financially;
- sufficient capital and business performance track record;
- local knowledge.

## Find out more

Natural Economy Northwest  
[www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk](http://www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk)

Grazing Animals Project  
[www.grazinganimalsproject.org.uk](http://www.grazinganimalsproject.org.uk)

Information about the Morecambe Bay scheme on the Grazing Animals Project  
[www.grazinganimalsproject.org.uk/gap\\_site/morecambe\\_bay\\_local\\_grazing\\_scheme.html](http://www.grazinganimalsproject.org.uk/gap_site/morecambe_bay_local_grazing_scheme.html)

<sup>1</sup> Morecambe Bay Local Grazing Scheme: Review of options and business plan

[www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk/resources+reports.php](http://www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk/resources+reports.php)



High quality organic meat products are among the benefits of local grazing schemes.

