

Conservation or business? The LLTNPA's approach to land management plans

Description

Prompted by the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority's refusal this week to provide me with a list of the research they have commissioned in the last five years, I have been checking the contracts they have awarded from the Scotland Contracts portal ([see here](#)). While this did not reveal much about what research and other such work the LLTNPA has commissioned from external sources, it did reveal some very interesting information about the LLTNPA's approach to that Estate Management Plans, plans which the LLTNPA has refused to make public ([see here](#)).

Almost all contracts let by public authorities are now meant to be advertised through the Contracts Portal. This is a useful counter to the increasing tendency for all levels of government not to record how or why decisions are taken. (The LLTNPA's camping byelaws provide a good example of this with officials claiming to hold no information about what discussions took place between Ministers and the National Park Authority about the need for byelaws despite Linda McKay writing a letter to then Minister Aileen Mcleod saying the byelaws were a follow up to a discussion with the previous Minister Paul Wheelhouse).

While my search did reveal the existence of a couple of research/audit type reports others, which I know exist, did not appear to be recorded there. I could find no trace, for example, of any contract which might have covered the Strategic Environmental Assessment for the National Park Partnership Plan. This was undertaken by Collingwood Environmental Planning Ltd based in Westminster and Volume 1 alone was 150 pages long. It is unlikely to have been cheap. The information on the Contracts Portal therefore appears incomplete, perhaps time for the audit committee to scrutinise how far the LLTNPA is meeting the procurement rules? That would give something for Board Members to do ([see here](#)).

What I did find however was details of contracts awarded to outside organisations to help landowners produce estate management plans under the general heading of "*Provision of technical support to landowners*":

Title	Contract start	Contract end	Awarded to	Minimum bid	Max
Renewable Energy Specialist	26-03-13	26-03-18	Smith Gore Step (1)	£35,750	£175
Revenue opportunities outdoor recreation	08/05/13	2017?	Bowles Green Ltd (2) Laurence Gould Partnership (3)	£72,000	£108

			Lockett Agri-environmental (1)			
Conservation, agri-environment and climate change	01-04-14	2017?	Walking the Talk (2)	£31,000	£70,	
			Farming & Conservation (3)			
Forestry and woodlands	01-04-14	2017?	Eamonn Wall & Co	£25,000	£74,	
Farm Business Consultant	01-04-14		Laurence Gould Partnership	£55,000	£89,	
				£218,750	£516	

To be fair to the LLTNPA, the outsourcing of estate plan consultancy was referred to in reports to their Delivery Group [EIR 2017-071 evaluation land management plans Appendix A](#) but what I had not put together before was the amount of resources the LLTNPA had devoted to the production of these management plans. In 2014, besides appointing a second land management adviser to their own staff to progress this work, they had committed to spending a minimum of £218,750 (see table above) on external consultancy to land owners. (The sum might be considerably more than this because the contracts portal only provides information on the range of bids for contracts, not the price of the successful contractor and its very unlikely, for example, that Smith Gore bid £35,750 to provide advice on renewables).

It appears safe to conclude from this that the LLTNPA has spent well over £300k (taking costs of their own staff into account) on producing 4-5 Estate/whole farm plans, that is c£60k per plan, plans which they refuse to make public.

This, and other information from the contracts portal, raises a number of further public interest questions:

- Given the amount of money spent, why did no proper written evaluation take place, to establish whether these secret plans are value for money?
- What are the cost implications for the new National Park Partnership plan which commits to a further roll out of these secret estate plans?
- Given four out of the five contracts now appear to have expired and the Smith Gore contract ends in March, how will the LLTNPA support this work in future and will it continue to be secretive?
- Can the LLTNPA provide assurances that none of the advice given under the “revenue opportunities for outdoor recreation” contract involved advising on charges that could affect access (eg advising landowners on how to charge for car parking?).
- Can the LLTNPA provide assurances that all the Renewables Energy Advice to landowners provided by Smith Gore put the landscape quality of the National Park before economic return to landowners?

The evidence is starting to suggest that the LLTNPA has been far more interested in promoting commercial approaches to land management rather than conservation or public enjoyment of the land through its land management plans. This is basically a neo-liberal approach: money and making it comes first; public services should be supporting that aim (so despite the fortunes being made out of hydro schemes the LLTNPA still subsidises landowners in the preparatory work for these schemes without asking for anything back); and expert advice is better outsourced than provided by your own staff.

We need a public debate on who and what the land in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park is for – is it about making money for landowners or is it about public recreation and conservation?

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. landed estates
2. LLTNPA
3. renewables
4. secrecy

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