

Forestry and Land Scotland's campsite outsourcing merry-go-round

Description

Just two months after Forestry England (FE) and Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS) bought back the Camping in The Forest (CiCF) business from the Camping and Caravanning Club ([see here](#)), all 16 campsites are all being outsourced again. FLS is currently advertising 15 year leases, through a company called CDLH, for Cobleland in the Trossachs, Cashel on east Loch Lomond and Glenmore below Cairn Gorm for an annual cost of £85k ([see here](#)), £185k ([see here](#)) and £315k ([see here](#)) respectively.

In their news release at the end of February announcing “an exciting future” for the three campsites, which are now to be separately managed from those in England, FLS failed to mention that it was planning to outsource them again. How outsourcing will “*make possible the potential expansion of the network of campsites beyond existing locations*” is unclear. But following re-organisation and cuts to its outdoor recreational staff it appears that FLS no longer has the management capacity to take on these campsites and is only interested in the income they might generate.

The cost of the buy back and its implications

After public outrage that the campsites were kept closed after the Covid lockdown was relaxed, FLS bought back the three campsites for an undisclosed sum. Last week, in response to an Information Request, FLS refused to say what that sum was:

Information Not Released

I have applied an exemption under Section 33(1)(b) of the Freedom of Information Act – disclosure would (or would be likely to) prejudice the interests of a person or organisation. This is because as part of the Memorandum of Understanding clause that requires parties to keep the terms of the agreement confidential (at the price paid). The Agreement will come to an end at the time we are publishing our Annual Accounts in which this details the process of securing new operators and releasing the details of the negotiations with this process.

Extract from the response to my FOI request

This is government in Scotland at its opaque worst. Whose interests are served confidentiality agreements, whether short-term or not? Certainly not those of the public.

By saying they will eventually make public what they have paid, FLS can circumvent the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act which excludes public authorities from providing information which they say they intend to publish in due course. There is no point in appealing as the understaffed Information Commissioner's Office is overwhelmed and most cases now take a year to process. But by delaying the bad news, FLS has bought itself time to sign legally binding leases with new operators which will then be used to preclude any possibility of an alternative course of action (just as Scottish Enterprise has done with its Exclusivity Agreement with Flamingo Land at Balloch).

It appears too that FLS is now trying to recoup the costs of purchase by raising the rents.

**NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 28 FEBRUARY 2021**

18. Commitments under operating leases

At 28 February 2021 the LLP had future minimum lease payments due under non-cancellable leases for each of the following periods:

	28 February 2021 £000
Not later than 1 year	500
Later than 1 year and not later than 5 years	2,000
Later than 5 years	29,638
	32,138
	32,138

Extract from the last Camping in the Forest Accounts.

The Camping and Caravanning Club, who under the buy-out are still managing the campsites this year, paid c£500k a year in rent but for all 16 sites. Note 19 to the 2021 accounts shows £91,489 of this was to FLS, who are now marketing the three sites for a total of £585k a year – a six-fold increase.

Set against this, as a shareholder in CiTF, FLS has up till now also been entitled to a share of the profits from the campsites. This would appear to have been c£38,755 for the financial year till 31st March 2020 where £705k was reported as being distributed to shareholders (i.e 3/16s of FLE and FLS joint 28% share of the company). Add this to the ground rent and you get £130,244, still way below the £585k FLS is now asking for.

This huge hike in rent means it is very unlikely that any future operator that will be able to provide the sort of low cost pitches for tents and campervans that both our National Parks need and which I advocated in my post in March:

“The Cairngorms and Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authorities need to tell FLS that, having taken back the business, it is time to review and reduce the charges to make the campsites more accessible”.

The plan to replace pitches for tents and campervans/touring caravans with holiday lodges

That FLS now wishes to extract every penny they can from these campsites and the paying public is

re-inforced by CDLH's marketing information which states that for Glenmore *"There is a planning consent in place for 38 lodges to be constructed on site"*.

Lodges are potentially even more profitable than tents, so it appears FLS is deliberately encouraging future operators to replace pitches for tents and tourers with fixed buildings which will reduce the capacity of the Glenmore site. This will only drive even more people to camp by the roadside along Loch Morlich, creating a management headache for other FLS staff and the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA). It is totally irresponsible and is a repeat of what happened in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs where, after the National Park Authority allowed campsite capacity to be reduced through various planning decisions, they used the high levels of roadside camping to justify the introduction of the byelaws which have camping in the camping management zones without a permit a criminal offence.

The planning consent for the 38 lodges dates back a long way but, because the work was commenced in 2014, even though nothing has happened since, under our pro-developer planning laws it is classed as valid for all time unless the planning authority issue a notice of completion (which takes a year). I have emailed the CNPA asking they issue such a notice now to preclude the chance of any new operator putting in new lodges.

The only silver lining to this disaster is that the way FLS has structured the leases, all of which are limited to 15 year terms, means there is not much incentive for the private sector to invest heavily in the camp sites, particularly at Glenmore given the rent.

The failure to involve the local community

FLS marketed these three campsites without any attempt to engage with local communities to see if they were interested in taking on responsibility for them. That became public two weeks ago when the Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust was reported ([see here](#)) as saying it intends to bid for the lease of the Glenmore site. It was clearly not consulted beforehand and should have never been put in that position.

Ironically, on 30th June FLS issued a news release claiming to be leading the way on community empowerment in Scotland ([see here](#)):

"In its [fifth annual report](#) outlining its work, FLS highlights the existing 94 partnerships, agreements or leases with communities, as well as 19 successful asset transfers under its Community Asset Transfer Scheme since its inception in 2017."

So why didn't FLS engage with the AGCT to see if they wanted to take over the management or the land before marketing the Glenmore site? That reinforces the argument that these campsite leases are all about the income they can bring FLS rather than the benefit to local communities or the wider public interest.

The problem now is that if AGCT submit a bid for Glenmore for the asking rent – £315k is almost £1000 a day – they will have very little flexibility to provide the sort of low cost camping facilities that are so badly needed in Glenmore. I hope they won't be so foolish but now ask Scottish Ministers that

FLS negotiates with them as they have negotiated with other local communities in Scotland.

What need to happen

The contrast between FLS' approach and what could be done is illustrated by what Luss Estates have done at Luss campsite since they took it back in-house in 2020 from the Camping and Caravanning Club. They have invested over £500,000 without any erosion of the camping area and the cost for camping is £7 per person for a night. That is cheap compared to the £18.50 charged at the FLS campsites (the charge covers two adults) and good value compared to the £4 a night now being charged by the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) for a permit to camp in places with no facilities.

Sadly, having sought FLS support to introduce the camping byelaws, the LLTNPA is far too compromised to speak out against the outsourcing of the Cashel and Cobleland campsites and call for them to be managed in the public interest. The CNPA has, by contrast, been reported as being supportive of the AGCT bid for Glenmore and this could provide a major opportunity to realise some of the objective of the Cairngorm and Glenmore strategy ([see here](#)). This aimed to *"increase collaboration between public agencies and private businesses in managing the area and progressing strategic projects"* but never recovered from Highland and Island Enterprise (HIE)'s disastrous outsourcing of the Cairngorm Mountain business to Natural Retreats or HIE's management since.

Imagine if the AGCT were to take-over, on favourable terms, not just Glenmore campsite but the facilities at Cairn Gorm. That would create the potential for some joined up management from the bottom of the glen to the top of the mountain. For example, in respect of camping provision, it could allow the number of places for tents in the Glenmore campsite, which is sheltered from the weather, to be maximised while providing for campervans at Coire na Ciste through better facilities (a cafe would be good), lower charges and more flexible management unlike what HIE and Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd have been doing ([see here](#) and [here](#)).

Category

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Author
nickkempe

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