

# BURLEY PARISH COUNCIL

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Your ref: GF 1757 16

Date: 6<sup>th</sup> January 2017

## By email attachment

Mr Damian Brewitt,  
Director  
National Audit Office

Dear Mr Brewitt,

## Review of New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme - Wetland Restoration

I am grateful for your acknowledgement of my emailed correspondence that I sent on behalf of Burley Parish Council on 25 November 2016.

Not surprisingly, there is much more pertinent information on our files which we could make available if you felt in need of more explanation – but, naturally, I do not wish to add excessively to the paperwork on this subject with which you must now be faced.

Nonetheless, there are 3 issues upon which I feel we should expand further at this stage: -

**Firstly Forestry Commission Fol/EIR enquiries** - Burley Parish Council has now decided to pursue this matter with the Information Commissioner's Office. After further consideration, we do not believe we should leave matters at the point reached in the correspondence to date which has so far indicated very unsatisfactory record-keeping by the FC i.e. at the least, below the legally-required standard to support grant making in respect of WR projects.

Therefore, a copy of our most recent letter to the FC in Bristol dated 15 December 2016 will be forwarded to you shortly together with copy of our submission to the ICO that is in preparation.

**Secondly Forestry Commission contract tendering process for WR projects** – We cannot be sure whether you have yet seen the FC's response to the Fol/EIR request for information on this subject submitted on 29 September 2016 by Mr J Stoker.

I **attach** with the email covering this letter **a copy** of that response dated 26 October since I believe it could be of particular interest to you and your colleagues at this stage.

Mr Stoker shares BPC's interest regarding New Forest Wetland Restoration (along with many other affected parties).

You will see from the FC's response that he requested: -

- 1) **"The Quotations tendered, including the full details of the companies tendering"** for 5 of the New Forest Wetland Restoration projects, and
- 2) **"The reasons for the selection of the successful companies"**.

The tender quotations listed in response to Request 1) we find particularly interesting, not least since these include tender figures from 7 companies in respect of projects 3 and 4 (one of which is the Harvestslade Bottom project i.e. the subject of my previous email re-our Fol/EIR enquiries).

Only one company is shown to have tendered for projects 1, 2 and 5 i.e. *Alaska Environmental Contracting Ltd*. We believed its bids were accepted in these respects.

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*Alaska* was the company selected for project 4 (Harvestslade) despite its figure being 48% higher than the lowest tenderer and 35% higher than the next lowest.

(Note: Project 5 remains incomplete at this stage; *Alaska* has also been selected for the next, and largest, project to date i.e. Latchmore Brook. However, that project has stalled due to the NFNPA's refusal to grant Planning Permission at Committee on 15 November 2016).

The FC's response to Mr Stoker's Request 2) indicates how their decision making process works in identifying the most suitable contractor i.e. their evaluation matrix.

But there must surely be more to this process than is evident from the FC's commentary i.e. that indicates *how* the decisions are made but not specifically *why* the particular contractors were selected on these occasions

No doubt your organisation is best qualified/equipped to follow up such thoughts, if deemed appropriate.

There can be no doubt, however, that *Alaska* currently occupy a dominate position in the WR contracting business in the New Forest.

That leads to the final issue I wish to draw to your attention now, the significance of which you may not yet be fully aware, viz: -

**Thirdly "New Forest Wetland Restoration Review"** (Published March 2016) prepared for the FC by Jonathan Cox Associates in conjunction with the River Restoration Centre. (It should be noted that the RRC is said to be an impartial, not-for-profit group offering expert advice).

This Review was proclaimed in the press by the FC to be a report from independent experts showing "*considerable success for this (the HLS WR) scheme*".

After prolonged pressure from BPC, a meeting with the joint writers of the Review was arranged by the chairman of the NF Consultative Panel, Natural England and the FC on 11 November 2016 to consider & discuss the report's contents and recommendations.

BPC and other interested parties present then learnt that "*This was not a research report as may arise from a detailed scientific study nor a detailed project report as had accompanied the LIFE 3 works*" (That earlier report was prepared in 2006 by Hampshire County Council as the project managers for WR works prior to the inauguration of the New Forest National Park Authority)

This latest report is quite lengthy and it should have some relevance within your overall considerations. However, I would remark that the report could only identify *some* successful outcomes within the 8 completed projects that had been briefly inspected (out of a total of some 140 projects undertaken by the FC over the past two decades).

Significantly, the report particularly observed, inter alia, within its 'Summary and Conclusions': - "*However, as yet there has been no formal systematic review to evaluate change and learning across the Forest-wide restoration works and programme. With future changes in delivery teams, the less well documented project-by-project approach could result in significant loss of specific experience and understanding. A more strategic and well documented approach to selection, objective setting, appropriately targeted monitoring and evaluation would derive significant benefits and inform each future project*"

You will doubtless reach your own conclusions of the full implications to be drawn from the overall report. However, we have been particularly disappointed to note from it the inadequate level of recorded baseline data available against which to measure the results of individual WR projects in appropriately-rigorous scientific, analytical terms for such works involving SSSI's in the New Forest National Park - with all its SAC, SPA and Ramsar designations.

However, bearing in mind the responses previously received from the FC to our FoI/EIR enquiries, I cannot say we are surprised to have that confirmed now. It may also help to explain the absence of an appropriate post-completion monitoring regime; and that despite the specific availability of additional grant funding for such purpose within the NF HLS Scheme contract documentation.

At this stage I feel bound to mention (in case you are not yet aware and it could be of some relevance) that the proprietor / managing director of Alaska, Mr William Bond of Wareham, is understood to have a number of other personal interests in undertakings linked to Land Engineering / Wetland Restoration projects.

Moreover, it was recently reported in the local press that Mr Bond himself is a volunteer board member of the River Restoration Centre, where his role is said to be 'strategic'.

I shall, as I have said above, be sending you next week a copy of what we are saying to the ICO regarding the unsatisfactory responses we have received from the FC. Do let me know, however, if there is any other aspect of your Review with which you think we might be able to assist at any stage.

Yours sincerely,



RGC Clarke, FRICS

Chairman of Burley Parish Council Planning Committee