

Flamingo Land at Loch Lomond – what next?

Description



Balloch Impression of West Riverside Walk by 7N Architects from community planning report

On Wednesday, Scottish Enterprise announced that it had appointed Flamingo Land Ltd, which runs a holiday resort, theme park and zoo in North Yorkshire, as the “preferred developer” for the 20 hectare site it owns on the west bank of the River Leven in Balloch ([see here](#)). The development, billed as the “Iconic Leisure Resort Loch Lomond” will apparently involve £30m being invested in “lodges, a boutique hotel, hostel and glamping pods together with a range of high quality family based attractions and restaurants that are fitting with the aims of the National Park.”

How this fits with the first three statutory aims of the National Park, conservation of the cultural and natural heritage, enjoyment of the special qualities of the area and sustainable use of natural resources I am not sure. Scottish Enterprise certainly didn’t explain this in their [news release](#). My guess is the “Iconic Leisure Resort Loch Lomond” is supposed to fulfil the fourth and final statutory aim

of the National Park, “sustainable economic development”.

Earlier this year the LLTNPA held a Scottish Government funded community planning event, known as a charrette in Balloch to draw a community plan for the area. There is a fair amount of derelict/neglected ground around the settlement and the idea was to involve the community in developing a vision for the area. This was never though about giving the community control as is shown by what happened in January when the Balloch and Haldane Community Council asked for a decision on a proposed housing development for the green space next to the LLTNPA HQ to be deferred until after a full tourist plan had been developed, ie after the charrette:

Balloch & Haldane Community Council would request that the Planning Committee defers the planning decision in respect of this site until the NP considers the wider issues in respect of tourist and visitor management and development in Balloch in line with the proposed Local Development Plan. In particular there are some key issues to be considered such as overall car parking provision and the potential for further tourist development in Balloch.

What could be reasonable than that?

Response: The request by B&HCC is noted and whilst it is for the Committee Members to consider this request, it is the opinion of the Planning Authority that it would be unreasonable to defer the determination of this application whilst awaiting the adoption of the proposed Local Development Plan (LDP) ([committee report](#))

The LLTNPA Planning Committee members approved their officers' recommendation and ignored the views of something like 50 members of the local community – a record for the LLTNPA? – who attended the Planning Committee in January. Not a good precedent, but maybe not all is lost. LLTNPA Chief Executive Gordon Watson, in welcoming the Flamingo Land Development did say:

A key point that came out of the Charrette was the aspiration in the local community to see the West Riverside developed in a way that connects Lomond Shores to the village, to make the most of Balloch as a gateway to Loch Lomond.

The charrette report's visual depiction of this is shown in the photo above and articulated as follows:

What should happen?

? An enhanced riverside walkway connecting village centre, Balloch Pier and Loch Lomond Shores.

? Integration of existing routes: River Leven towpath, John Muir Way, Three Lochs Way and via Loch Lomond Shores to Cameron House.

? Develop guidelines for redeveloping pier area for Maid of the Loch operations and new water sports centre

? Open up views of the river and loch, integrate facilities, improve pedestrian connections to village centre and Loch Lomond Shores.

? Define guidelines for development to rear of riverside walkway: create opportunities for eating, drinking and outdoor activity to improve Balloch's offer and choice, connect rather than divide village centre and Loch Lomond Shores, maximise access for visitors and residents.

? Put in place measures to reduce erosion of river banks.

Whether Flamingo Land will be able to deliver this is another question and enough has been said so far to raise serious doubts:

"Being in the beautiful surroundings of the national park, the activities will be swimming and outdoor adrenaline pursuits rather than the rollercoasters and rides and attractions that we have become famous for at Flamingo Land," (Gordon Gibb, Chief Executive and largest shareholder Flamingo Land).

Sounds good until you consider whether Balloch is really a very good place for swimming or other "outdoor adrenaline pursuits". Now, I know open water swimming has become very popular in the National Park but Balloch is the single biggest centre for boating and swimmers in the water and boats do not go well together – its just too dangerous. Perhaps Flamingo Land is going to build a swimming pool? In terms of other adrenaline outdoor pursuits, Balloch is really only well placed for watersports. Now sailing, kayaking or cruising on the loch are not particularly noted for inducing adrenaline rushes so it looks as though Flamingo Land is thinking of more speedboats and water skiing which have historically raised lots of issues in terms of their compatibility with the aims of the National Park. Before Scottish Enterprise and the LLTNPA let this development go any further I think they need to clarify what activities Flamingo Land is actually proposing and consider whether these really are compatible with the aims of the National Park.

The other big issue is about the intensity of the development. Now the local communities aspirations for a good walking connection between the village and Loch Lomond shores looks good to me and I am sure there is a place for some low key accommodation and places to eat. They made no mention

of any need for more accommodation though and this seems to be a key part of Flamingo Land and Scottish Enterprise's plans for a "family-oriented attraction". Note, a single attraction, which could easily become a variation on a theme park and Scottish Enterprise explicitly state they appointed Flamingo Land because of its strong record in creating visitor attractions. However, overdevelop this bit of land and its qualities could be completely destroyed and Scottish Enterprise's talk about attracting even more visitors suggests that this could just become an extension of Loch Lomond Shores. Is this really about what the National Park is about or what the local community wants?



Photo of Balloch from charrette report, the West Riverside site is the wooded area that connects Loch Lomond Shores (right of centre) with the first bridge on the river Leven. If the Flamingo Land is too intensive, the whole of the west bank into a ribbon development like Lomond shores.

Can Flamingo Land deliver sustainable economic development?

I think its important to appreciate that appointing a fairly large leisure company to develop the west Riverside site was not the only option available to Scottish Enterprise, although it is no doubt the easiest. What about community development? The ideas coming out of the charrette, for places to eat and drink and outdoor activities could all be delivered by small businesses or social enterprises run by local people. This would not require lots of capital and would return income to the area – something I would call sustainable economic development. The problem though is such businesses could not fund the walkway/riverbank improvements under our current financial system and it looks as though intensive development under the control of an outside organisation is the price to be paid for connecting the village to Loch Lomond shores. In my view, there should be other ways to fund this sort of local infrastructure development to address what the local community identified as problems in

their first workshop:

“What Charrette participants outlined as their most disliked aspects of Balloch during the first workshop:

- ? Condition of Balloch Castle*
- ? Inadequate Parking and congestion in Village Centre*
- ? No ‘Heart’ to the Village and poor sense of arrival*
- ? Commercialisation of the Loch*
- ? Poor connectivity to/ from the Loch and Lomond Shores*
- ? Lack of safe and accessible nighttime activities*
- ? Poor signage and lighting*
- ? Lack of Public Conveniences*
- ? Unsightly Marina/ Boat Yard and river management*

I fear that Scottish Enterprise in appointing Flamingo Land is just promoting more of the same type of “economic solutions”, temporary jobs during construction and then low paid jobs in the tourism industry to follow. You can see some of this from Flamingo Land’s last financial statements that cover the period until March 2015:

- Flamingo Land is a family owned business, with three Directors from the Gibb family and is wholly owned by Flamingo Land Resort Ltd, which is in turn owned by two of the Gibb family directors.
- The Gibb family do very well from their business, with the Directors receiving £1,003,716 in emoluments with £582,301 of this going to Gordon Gibb, the main shareholder and Chief Executive. They also received a further £235k in dividends paid to Flamingo Land Resort Ltd.
- Staff appears to do less well. 313 was the average number of people employed during the year (length of working week and contractual position unclear) and they received a total of £6,352,483 in wages net of employer’s National Insurance. The means they received an average wage of £20,295, ie well below the national average of £26,500. By the time you account for the much higher wages managers receive, it looks like majority of the workforce are paid at or just above the statutory National Living Wage (which comes to £15k for a 40 hour week).
- The total of £123,385 spent on other pension costs (apart from National Insurance) – just a quarter of the salary received by Mr Gibb – shows that the bulk of the workforce will receive no pension (this of course will change with the stakeholder pension scheme).
- Flamingo Land contributed £25k to the Conservative Party in both 2014-5 and the year proceeding it.

I think this evidence shows that Flamingo Land is unlikely to bring any great economic benefit to the people of Balloch and a very good reason why Scottish Enterprise should have explored community controlled alternatives.

Now, I am not saying Flamingo Land is a bad company. Compared to Natural Retreats which was appointed by HIE, Scottish Enterprise's equivalent in the north, to run Cairngorm its very well run. There is over £15m in shareholder funds, which will help finance developments in Balloch, compared to Natural Retreats parent company whose net worth is (minus) (£22,545,689). It also regularly invests in infrastructure and pays corporation tax. It does though appear though to be operated on neo-liberal principles which are basically about benefitting the few before the many. Will it really deliver the fairer society that the Scottish Government says it wants to see?

Recently Flamingo Land also bought the 12 Acre Woodbank site on the west side of Balloch by the A82. That too has been earmarked for visitor development. You have to wonder too what Flamingo Land is really planning for Balloch which they describe as a "rare opportunity". For what is the question? Flamingo Land are now in a very strong position to hold the LLTNPA to ransom in terms of what types of development are delivered. A key question therefore is whether the LLTNPA will be strong enough to withstand the pressure they will be subjected to despite all the talk of "partnership". I hope too the local community will start campaigning to ensure that the development delivers aspirations for better paid jobs and pensions as well as the vision they developed in the charrette.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

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