

Flamingo Land – the gap between rhetoric and reality

Description



COMMUNITIES ARE TAKING THE LEAD

SCOTLAND has some of the finest towns in the world and as Minister for Local Government and Housing, I am determined to do all that I can do to ensure they continue to thrive. I believe strongly that most of the solutions to towns and town centres rest with those who live and work there – by this I mean the local residents, businesses, community groups, and community planning partners. Decisions affecting local communities should be made by those communities, it is they who hold the knowledge and understanding of how the place works and they are also the ones with the long term vested interest in getting things right. It is our job in the Scottish Government to provide the supportive legislative framework and a “can-do” culture to encourage Scotland’s towns to rise to this challenge. The Community Empowerment Act is a major step in our drive to give people a stronger voice in the decisions that matter to them. When it comes into force later this year it will give people more powers to take over land and buildings and have their voices heard. And since we published the Town Centre Action Plan in 2013 I can see that significant progress has been made. Business Improvement Districts are growing faster in Scotland than anywhere else in Europe, we now have over 225 Development Trusts and many of these have a clear focus on the town and town centre. The Town Centre First Principle is encouraging the public sector to continue investing in town centres and help communities thrive. We have supported the creation of Scotland’s Towns Partnership which is a central hub for towns across Scotland to connect and share knowledge and advice. We’re also continuing to support the regeneration of our towns through exploring City Deals and regeneration programmes which will also benefit some of Scotland’s towns. The City Deal blends funding from the Scottish and UK Governments and other partners to enhance long-term aspirations such as transport, digital connectivity, tourism, housing and business projects. The devolved Growth Accelerator has been designed to encourage growth, create jobs and support businesses. Towns in the Glasgow City Region, Aberdeen City Region and Inverness are already set to benefit from substantial funding from the Scottish and UK Government, and we are discussing City Region Deal proposals with Edinburgh and South East Scotland. Through this continued investment I hope that we can continue to help our town centres flourish.

NEW FUNDS: Towns in the Aberdeen City Region are set to benefit greatly from the City Deal.

By **Kevin Stewart MSP, Minister for Local Government and Housing**

By coincidence, the above article appeared in the Sunday Herald (in their towns supplement) just a few days after Flamingo Land had been announced as the preferred developer for the west riverside site at Balloch ([see here](#)). The contrast between what Kevin Stewart is saying and what Scottish Enterprise announced is stark:

- The “solution” to the west riverside site has NOT been developed by those who live and work in Balloch apart from the aspiration that the site should link the Loch Lomond shores development to the town centre by means of a riverside site. The actual use of the rest of the site has not been subject to consultation.
- The decision to make Flamingo Land the preferred developer was not made by the local community but by Scottish Enterprise and could well have involved another member of the Scottish Government, the Business Minister.
- A Development Trust, the Scottish Government’s apparent preferred solution for re-invigorating towns like Balloch, appears not to have been considered.

Announcements that the LLTNPA was in discussions about the development of a theme park on the shores of Loch Lomond were made back in 2011 ([see here](#)) (thanks to a reader for the link!). It appears very likely that the secret site referred to by Wayne Gardner Young was west riverside.

Meantime, Government policy has changed so cosy deals with developers are no longer supposed to happen and the community should be put in the lead. Scottish Enterprise and the LLTNPA however have just blundered on (I don't blame the staff, just the senior management and Boards) with an approach that is now discredited.

I have submitted a number of Freedom of Information requests about this, such as whether the LLTNPA has assessed the likely impact this development could have on existing local businesses or if Scottish Enterprise advertised the opportunity. (I have not been able to find any contract advertisement on the Scotland Contracts Portal – that may just be me – but the public sector is now supposed to advertise all such opportunities there). In terms of public policy, following Kevin Stewart's piece, I believe the local community should have been given a chance to bid for the development or alternative use of the west riverside site.

So why the gap between rhetoric and reality?

The main reason I believe lies in neo-liberal thinking, which accepts there is no alternative to private finance to make things happen and indeed believes private enterprises do everything best. The problem is that despite all the evidence for the failure of neo-liberalism, the Scottish Government has not worked out any solutions to make Kevin Stewart's vision a reality. This I believe needs to involve local sources of finance (in German local banks finance local business and development) and more public expenditure (which is about our tax system and most pressingly tax evasion). However, Scottish Enterprise has hardly started to think about this, despite it having a co-operative development team, and it still operates as if large developers and developments are the only option.

Added to that, Fergus Ewing, the Scottish Government Minister responsible for tourism and enterprise from 2011 until earlier this year, has always been on the right wing of the SNP. He was responsible for both Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Island Enterprise and I don't think its a coincidence that outside developers have been brought in to develop two prime sites controlled by them, Natural Retreats at Cairngorm and now Flamingo Land at west Riverside. Its the way he thinks and he was never going to say to Scottish Enterprise "hang on a moment, is this the only option?"

At the same time the LLTNPA adopted an explicit neo-liberal path under their previous Chief Executive, Fiona Logan, who saw business as the answer to everything (this is well illustrated by her flirtation with Wayne Gardner Young – see link above). She then got her Board to adopt an explicit Commercialisation Policy in 2013 which covers every aspect of what the National Park does, from how to develop tourist facilities to charging for toilets and carparks (which I will cover further in due course). Part of this involved the Board getting big developers to pay for their planning section by increasing charges – a conflict of interest if ever there was one – as the future of the planners' jobs at

the National Park in part depends on developments such as Flamingo Land going ahead.

While the LLTNPA still claims to put the conservation and public enjoyment of the National Park first, the reality is that commercialisation is driving everything in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park. This is bad for local communities and bad for the people who visit the National Park. While we cannot expect our National Parks to address all the ills of neo-liberalism and the austerity that goes with it, if our National Parks are not about other values such as protecting landscape and nature from the excesses of capitalism and enabling people to enjoy these things, then they are not worth anything.

I think the organiser of the petition to stop Flamingo Land was right (see here) The Scottish Government should intervene, tell Scottish Enterprise and the LLTNPA to scrap the Flamingo Land proposal and start work with the local community and other organisations to develop alternatives. I would hope Kevin Stewart, the Minister, will publicly support that as a way forward in accordance with his thinking.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. flamingo land
2. planning
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