

The politics of campsites – the case of Strathard

Description

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The flat headland opposite Ledard House, at the start of the southern path to Ben Venue. Proposed

That campsites can become “political” issues is demonstrated in Strathard where Fergus Wood, the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority Board Member, lost his Council seat on 4th May ([see here](#)). On 11th May he withdrew his planning application for a new campsite by the shores of Loch Ard on Ledard Farm ([see here](#)).

The Interests of Board Members of the LLTNPA

The day before I received a very interesting letter from the LLTNPA [EIR 2017-039 Response Ledard farm](#) refusing to disclose correspondence between the National Park and Fergus Wood about this application. The reasons cited for this are “commercial confidentiality” and data protection:

Correspondence in relation to pre-planning requests for advice typically includes personal information and information that in its nature relates to commercial interests of an individual or business. The provision of a pre-application advice service helps in the delivery of an effective planning system, and it is important that such advice is provided confidentially. The practice of providing confidential pre-application advice to all planning applicants as required is common place across Scottish planning authorities and prospective planning applicants engage in the pre-application advice process with a reasonable and legitimate expectation of confidentiality

Note how the LLTNPA avoids saying whether the application contains personal information or commercial interests in this case. In fact, if there was personal information such as phone numbers on correspondence, normal practice is simply to redact this. Moreover, the fact there are commercial interests behind most planning applications is not the same as saying this is “commercial” information which might be exempt under our Freedom of Information laws. While the public may not expect every piece of correspondence they have with the National Park or other public authorities to be publicly available, Fergus Wood is not an ordinary member of the public but a Board Member. What should be important in terms of ethical standards in public life is there is complete transparency where Board Members make planning applications. Indeed the Scottish Government and Cosla has issued guidance on this <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0044/00444959.pdf>.

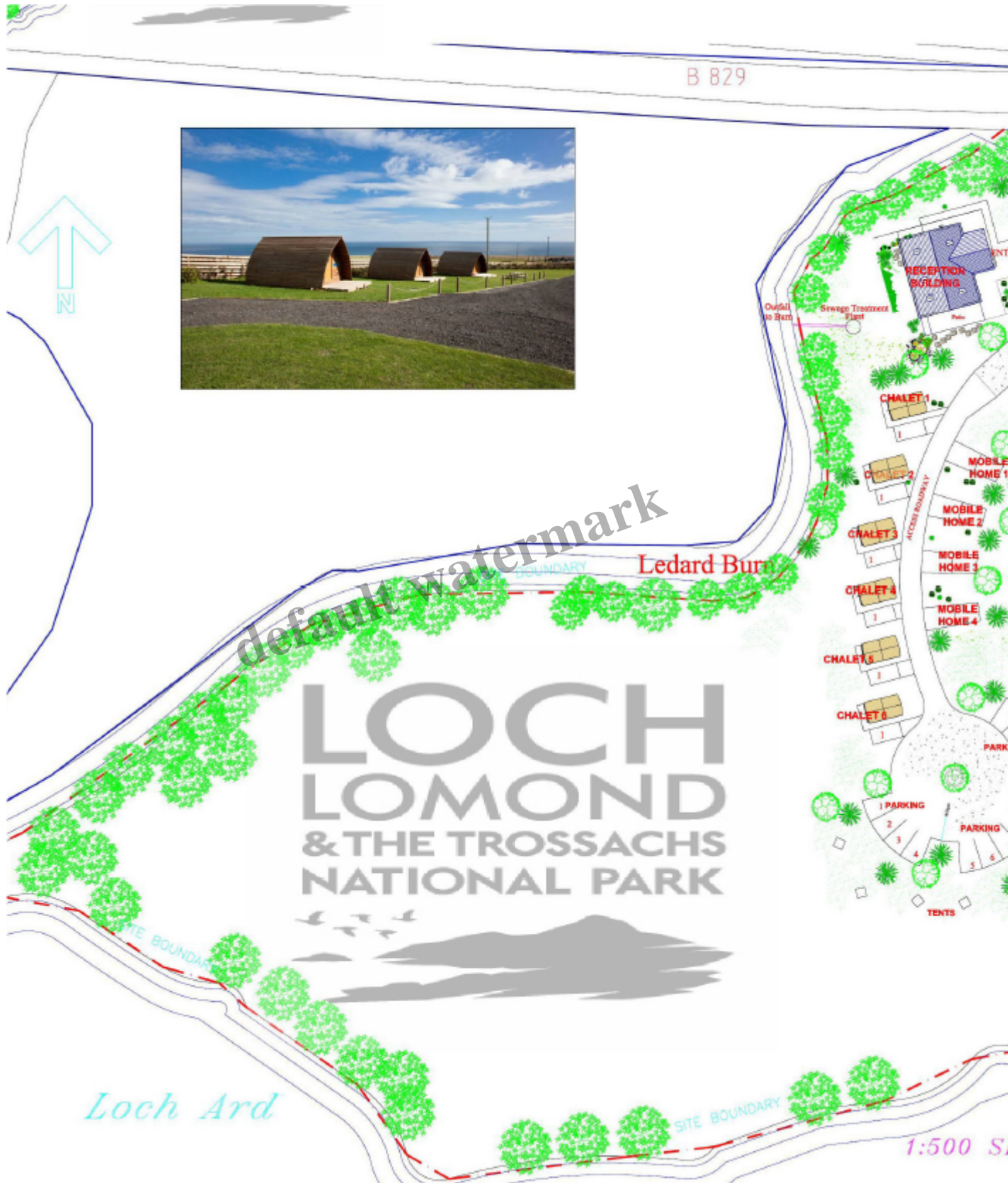
Procedures should be conducted in a consistent and transparent manner to avoid suspicions that councillors may have prejudiced their positions

While this statement was written about councillors taking the decision, rather than making an application, the principle should apply to both. Its quite clear the LLTNPA does not understand this at all:

“This individual would have had no expectation that correspondence regarding a proposed business development would be released into the public domain.”

The problem is there has been no transparency, Fergus Wood managed to fail to declare he was a Board Member when making the application, failed to engage with people (including neighbours who objected to the application) and he paid for this locally. Local people do not like the way this case has been handled. I am pretty certain the Park’s response to the information request will only make them even more suspicious should Fergus Wood submit a new application once he has stepped down from the LLTNPA Board.

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While the Plan for the campsite was in name Mrs F Wood, the application was in both names, and the application was about the interests of their spouses/partners

Context for the objections to the Ledard Farm campsite planning application

There is a shortage of campsites in the National Park and, as been stated in previous posts, its positive that Fergus Wood, as a Board Member, has been prepared to cater for campers, if not in his backyard at least in view of his front garden.



Ledard Farm, home of Fergus Wood, just across the B829 from the proposed campsite

The unprecedented number objections to this planning application can, I believe, be accounted for by the camping byelaws. The Friends of Loch Lomond and Trossachs, who rightly have long been arguing the need for new campsites across the National Park, in their letter of support for this application said they did so because it would make “a positive contribution to the Your Park Initiative”. The problem in Strathard, however, is “Your Park”, the contorted “vision” the LLTNPA has for camping.

As partial compensation for the camping ban across most of the lochshores in the National Park, the LLTNPA needed to show it was doing something. It therefore promised 300 new places to Scottish Ministers but to help meet this promised decided with Forestry Commission Scotland to develop a campsite on Loch Chon, a little further west along Strathard, where very few people had previous camped. The local community made representations about people being encouraged into the area without suitable infrastructure (the narrow road, supervision of the campsite etc) which the LLTNPA in its usual way said would all be addressed. What’s become clear in the last couple of months is that most of the re-assurances the LLTNPA made about that development are meaningless: the Park has failed to adhere to its own planning conditions and just a couple of weeks ago I found out that the warden appointed to supervise the site had left and a Ranger was driving in each day, a one hour trip, to manage the campsite (and presumably provide the bottled water which was needed because the water supply had failed – as predicted ([see here](#))).

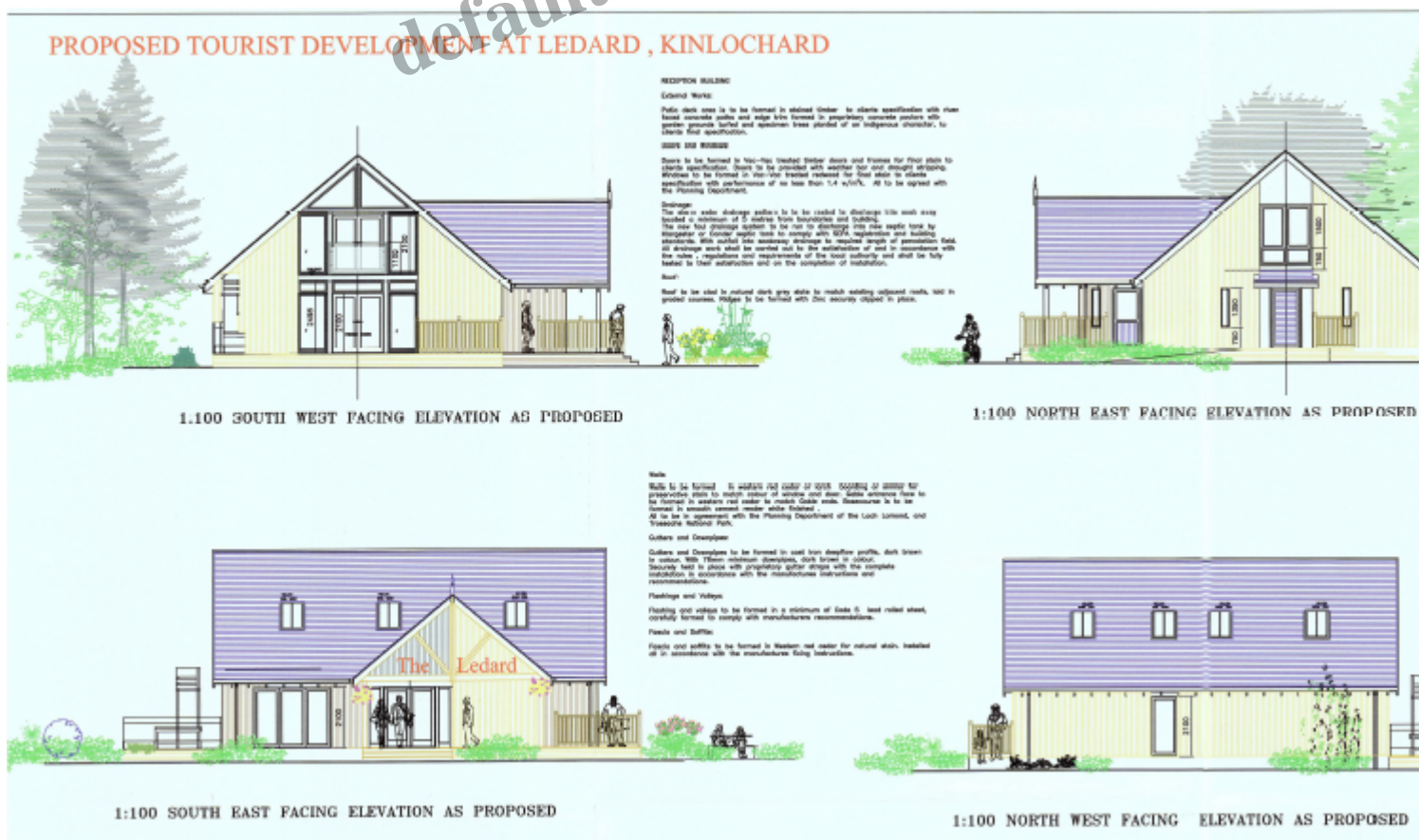
So, the context to the large number of planning objections to the Ledard Farm campsite was that local people were worried that large numbers of irresponsible campers – and the LLTNPA has spent the last three years selling a myth to local communities that campers account for all the ills in the National Park – would all end up around Kinlochard at the Loch Chon and Ledard farm campsites. These places being where people could still camp in the National Park and far more attractive for camping than the “permit zones” on Forest Drive ([see here](#)). Had Fergus Wood taken up local concerns about the Loch Chon proposal, and used these to inform his own proposals, he might have avoided the backlash. Like other Board Members, however, it appears he had become complacent because all the complaints to the Scottish Government had fallen on deaf ears and he therefore believed the National Park could continue to bulldoze through whatever it liked. He had forgotten about democracy, the unfair consequence of which in this case is only that the Tory Councillor and LLTNPA Board Member Martin Earl, who like Fergus Wood endorsed the ill-thought out Loch Chon campsite, appears to have benefitted at the SNP’s expense.

Merits of the objections to the Ledard Farm campsite

Despite this context, very few of the objections to the Ledard campsite application ([see here](#)) appeared based on NIMBYISM and most in my view were well argued. Here are some of the main points made:

- People referred to the Development plan context (which was also ignored at Loch Chon) stating that the size of the development was too large for the area
- People pointed out that the development was on a flood plain – contrary to National Park policy
- People argued that because of the open landscape character of the lochshore it would be much more appropriate to site a campsite on the north side of the A827.
- People were concerned about an influx of campervans along a narrow road (a concern that is now probably unwarranted as its become clearer the LLTNPA will be unable to enforce the camping byelaws against campervans and there is little risks therefore of large numbers being driven into Strathard).
- People were concerned about increased light pollution at night (the LLTNPA keeps promoting dark skies)

What the objections add up to is that this was a tourist development in the wrong place – I have to say that I tend to agree. While in many ways the planning application was positive (provision for staff to stay on site) it was still a development and would have introduced a high profile building close to the lochshore in a open situation:



There are plenty of better places for campsites in Strathard and if, as is rumoured, Fergus Wood intends to re-submit a planning application for a campsite once he has stood down from the LLTNPA Board, location will be all important. I would hope that both recreational and local interests would welcome a campsite in the right place.

A wider plan for the area

While Fergus Wood's proposed campsite has created massive controversy, on the other side on Ben Venue, the LLTNPA consented on 3rd May to a small new campsite at Trossachs Pier, at the east end of Loch Katrine, just outside the camping management zone ([see here for planning application](#)). There were just two representations against the proposal demonstrating that local communities are not against all developments, but this one is small and located in woodland. It includes water and electric hook ups and an effluent disposal point for campervans in the car park, upgrade of public toilets to include shower/wet room, 8 low cost camping pitches and 8 camping pods.

The trustees of the SS Walter Scott (who include the chair of Friends of Loch Lomond and Trossachs, James Fraser, who like me is on the Committee of the Scottish Campaign for National Parks), who made the application, have developed the proposal from its initial concept in a short period of time and also raised the funds to build it. This puts the LLTNPA to shame and highlights their failure to deliver all the basic campsites they had promised to deliver in the Trossachs as part of the 5 Lochs Management Plan (which now effectively appears to have been dumped) ([see here](#))

There is now the potential to develop a network of small campsites around Loch Katrine and Strathard which would enable people to make more use of the cycling and walking routes there.



Path which runs parallel to shores Loch Arklet between Inversnaid and Loch Katrine by Corriearklet

The path which was created to connect Inversnaid to Stronachlachar Pier, at the west end of Loch Katrine, is sadly unused and the camping byelaws (which takes in all the land between the path and the Loch despite the small numbers of people who ever camped here – its even more remote than Loch Chon) make it useless for backpackers who don't want to risk becoming criminals. Meantime while Stronachlachar Pier is just outwith the camping management zone, campers are not welcome:



While this is yet another unlawful no camping sign in the National Park, the

request is not unreasonable. What is needed is a sign which directs people to a good camping spot locally.

If there was a small basic campsite at Stronlachar or Loch Arklet, this would create a network of campsites in the west Trossachs (in addition to those at Trossachs Pier, Loch Chon and maybe in future Ledard Farm) which would allow lots of opportunities for short backpacking and cycle tours, for example at weekends. In my view that is what the National Park should be about and I would hope that people in the local community would agree.

What needs to be done in Strathard?

The basic problem in Strathard is that the LLTNPA has tried to impose ill-thought out proposals which suit its agenda but no-one else. Fergus Wood has paid a price for that. Strathard was never included in the 5 Lochs Management Plan but I believe what is needed first and foremost is a visitor management plan for the whole area. Unfortunately, the LLTNPA instead of building on the work for the rest of the Trossachs started by Grant Moir, now Chief Executive of the Cairngorms National Park Authority, Kevin Findlater, former Chief Inspector with the police and others, has let that go and has nothing to replace it. Visitor Infrastructure and management is therefore a shambles with all resources being diverted to policing the unenforceable camping byelaws.

The way forward therefore is the creation of a stakeholder group for Strathard – which in my view should be independent of the Park Authority who at present cannot be trusted on anything but be supported by it (in terms of staff time and resources) – whose mission should be to develop a plan for Strathard. Such a group needs to consider the infrastructure and other issues identified by local residents as well as wider interests.

I would hope that such a plan included the following as starters:

- proposals to develop a network of small campsites linking across the area (within which any proposal for a new campsite at Ledard farm could be judged)
- the potential to introduce public transport at weekends and holidays (using school buses) to enable some increase in visitor numbers without encouraging more traffic
- a reduction in the number of formal pitches at Loch Chon (which would be easy to achieve since many are already being overrun by vegetation) and abandonment of the current rules banning campervans from staying in the carpark or tents from pitching by the lochshore

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. camping
2. Camping bye laws
3. Governance
4. LLTNPA
5. paths
6. planning
7. secrecy

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