

Visitor chaos, development and the LLTNPA's plans for Balmaha

Description

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PARKING PAIN

Robert Fairnie

Traffic problems at a top Stirling area visitor attraction were brought into sharp focus at the weekend.

Authorities are being urged to act after two days of "chaos" on roads in the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park.

Frustrations are being expressed over the lack of parking spaces in Balmaha and the resulting traffic congestion problems in and around the national park.

It is claimed that — on a busy day — the popular car park, which holds 180 spaces, on the east of Loch Lomond shores can fill up by late morning — prompting visitors to leave their vehicles on the road between Balmaha and Rowerdennan and on other busy routes.

This can result in congestion on the roads and some vehicles, including emergency crews, not being able to navigate their way through, causing frustration to both local residents and other visitors.

Gordon Watson, chief executive of Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park, said that, along with Stirling Council, they support the aspiration to identify additional "overflow" parking options to help satisfy demand.

However, James Fraser, chairman of the Friends of Loch Lomond and The Trossachs, is calling on the authorities to deal with the issue immediately to prevent a stressful summer in the area.

The highlighted problems of overflowing cars in late — again —

...the current arrangements are wholly inadequate and urgently need to be addressed to ensure there is no repeat of the shambles which took place last weekend.

"I understand new arrangements are supposed to be in place with councils taking on more responsibility for traffic management and parking but it is evident from the chaos with road blockages and indiscriminate parking that the councils are ill-prepared and have not built in any flexibility for staffing up at busy weekends to deal with the problems."

SO WHAT NEXT?

Officials hunt for new parking area



Busy The car park at Balmaha sometimes is full by late morning

CHAOS IN BALMAHA

Residents' pleas over traffic nightmare



Warning Inspector McMenemy

He added that a "flood" of complaints had been lodged by visitors and local residents as a result.

The concerns were discussed at a meeting on Monday of Buchanan Community Council attended by Sandy Fraser of the Oak Tree Inn in Balmaha.

He said: "The car park at Balmaha just isn't big enough and it needs to be extended."



Complaint James Fraser

"This has to be the number one issue."

"With us coming in to the busy summer season we're going to see more and more visitors and the car park can't accommodate everyone. We simply can't be turning people away if there's nowhere to park. It would be a great shame if something didn't happen."

Police are keen to remind motorists that they will deal with

any vehicles that are parked dangerously or causing an obstruction.

Callander-based inspector Gerry McMenemy said: "The continued period of good weather has naturally attracted a large number of visitors into the area and this past weekend was exceptionally busy."

"Working with our partners at Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park, additional police officers were on duty over the weekend throughout the Lochs and Trossachs area. It was reassuring that no instances of disorder or antisocial behaviour in the local communities were reported to, or discovered by, police."

"The volume of traffic in the area was significantly greater than normal which does bring congestion to the rural roads network."

"Drivers travelling through or visiting the area should park their vehicles responsibly, that is safely and in accordance with any parking restrictions. Police Officers will deal with any vehicles that are parked dangerously, or causing an obstruction, particularly if the passage of emergency vehicles would be impeded."

Thanks to the reader who submitted this to Parkswatch

The chaos at Luss ([see here](#)) on the first weekend in May, was experienced at several other visitor hotspots in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park, but most notably and predictably at Balmaha. The LLTNPA has an opportunity to reflect on what happened when its Planning Committee considers draft Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) for Buchanan South ([see here](#)) at its meeting today. The SPG is also very relevant to the controversial proposed housing development in the Balmaha Plantation ([see here](#)). This post considers whether the new SPG will help address the issues at Balmaha in a way fitting for a National Park.

There are strict rules on what can be included in Supplementary Planning Guidance, which can only expand on, not change Development Plans.

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PROPOSED SITE & USES

HOUSING **H1**

TRANSPORT PROPOSAL **TR1**

BALMAHA

Balmaha is located in a highly scenic landscape setting on the edge of Loch Lomond.

It comprises a dispersed, low density collection of mostly houses with tourism related businesses including boatyard, pub, shop, hotel, cafe and visitor centre. It is identified in this Plan as a small rural community.

No formal village boundary is identified in order to help retain its special rural characteristics and dispersed development pattern. Several sites within Balmaha remain undeveloped and are the focus for future development. Therefore, only one site has been identified on Forestry Commission owned land.

Improved infrastructure to support water transport remains an important aspiration for this Plan and is identified as a Proposal. More detailed planning guidance for Balmaha is provided in the South Buchanan Rural Development Framework.

BALMAHA TR1: Balmaha Bay – Transport

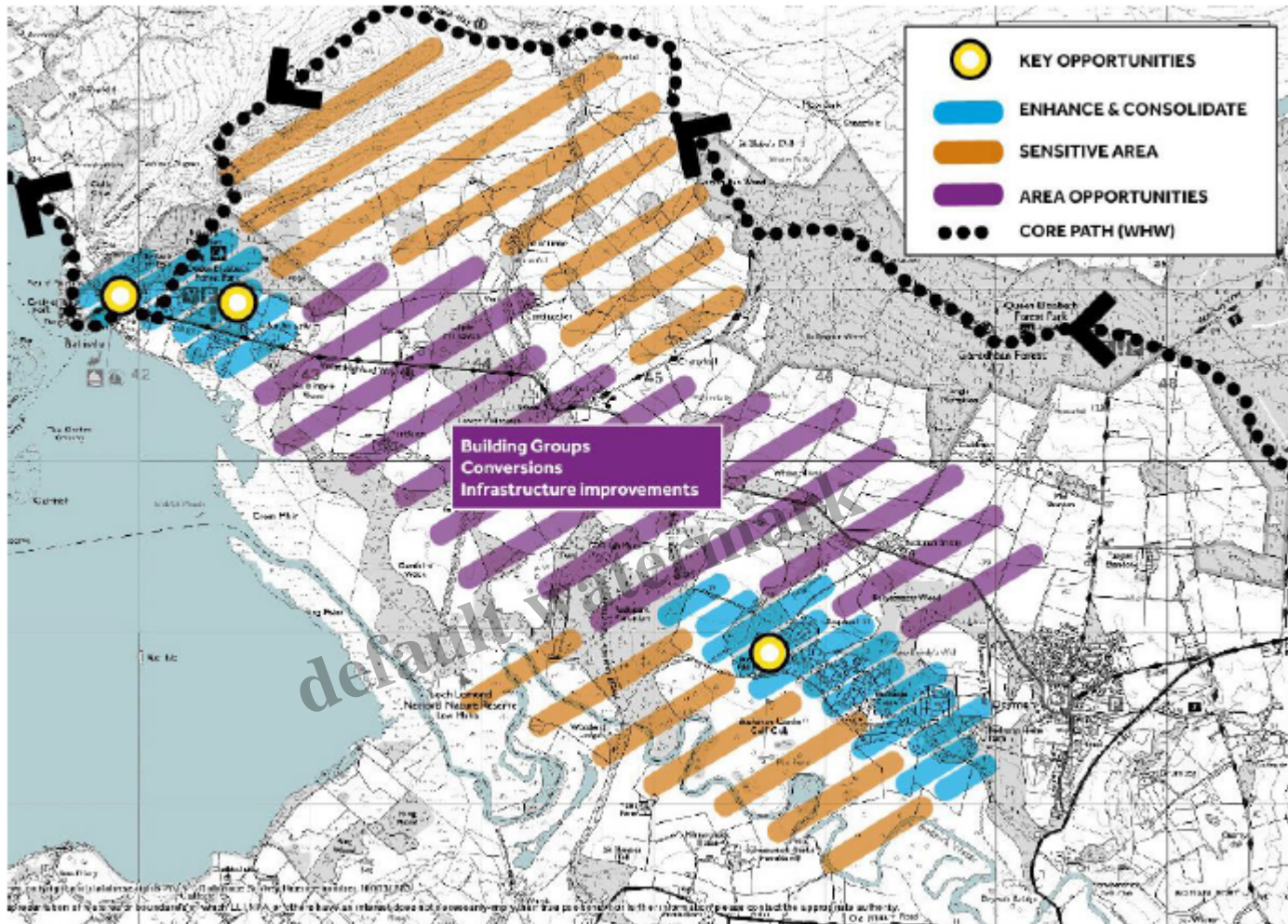
BALMAHA H1: Forestry Commission Site Housing [15 homes]

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What the LLTNPA Development Plan, approved by the Scottish Government earlier this year,

proposed for Balmaha (see above) was however extremely vague. It allowed considerable scope therefore for the Supplementary Planning Guidance to draw on the Park's policies, and explain how these would be applied to the area.

Map 1: Area covered by Rural Development Framework Area



SPG map

In the event the SPG only covers three of the policies set out in the Development Plan, Housing, Economic Development and Visitor Experience. The reason for this is not explained but the SPG does not cover over policy areas which are very relevant to Balmaha such as Transport and Natural Environment, the village being bordered by the Loch Lomond National Nature Reserve and the Highland Boundary fault.

Visitors and visitor management at Balmaha

While Balmaha is not readily accessible, it is the easiest place to get to on the east shores of Loch

Lomond and, with Conic Hill providing one of the best viewpoints in Scotland for a hill of its size and with the West Highland Way providing a walk along the loch shore, its not surprising the village is a popular tourist destination. With a poor bus service most people arrive by car. With just a hundred odd places in the carpark, and the road north of the village designated a clearway, its hardly surprising that cars overwhelm the village on sunny weekends and bank holidays.

**VISITOR
EXPERIENCE
OUTCOME**

VE4

The most popular parts of the National Park which experience pressures are managed to ensure that the quality of environment, visitor experience and community life are protected and enhanced.

WHY IS THIS OUTCOME IMPORTANT?

High visitor numbers can put pressure on our most accessible and popular places and landscapes within the Park, particularly on lochshores, in picturesque towns and villages, and along popular paths. These pressures take a number of forms ranging from congestion of car parks, litter, irresponsible or anti-social behaviour, and general wear and tear on the environment from the cumulative effect of high volumes of people visiting and recreating in these areas.

The National Park's road network can become very busy at peak times and problems can be exacerbated by illegal or irresponsible parking of vehicles. The safety of all types of road user can be threatened by vehicles travelling at unsafe speeds.

The access and use of the Loch Lomond islands still requires attention to ensure their precious habitats can thrive alongside land and water based recreational activity. The volume of marine litter affecting communities on Loch Long is a long-standing issue which requires innovative thinking to resolve.

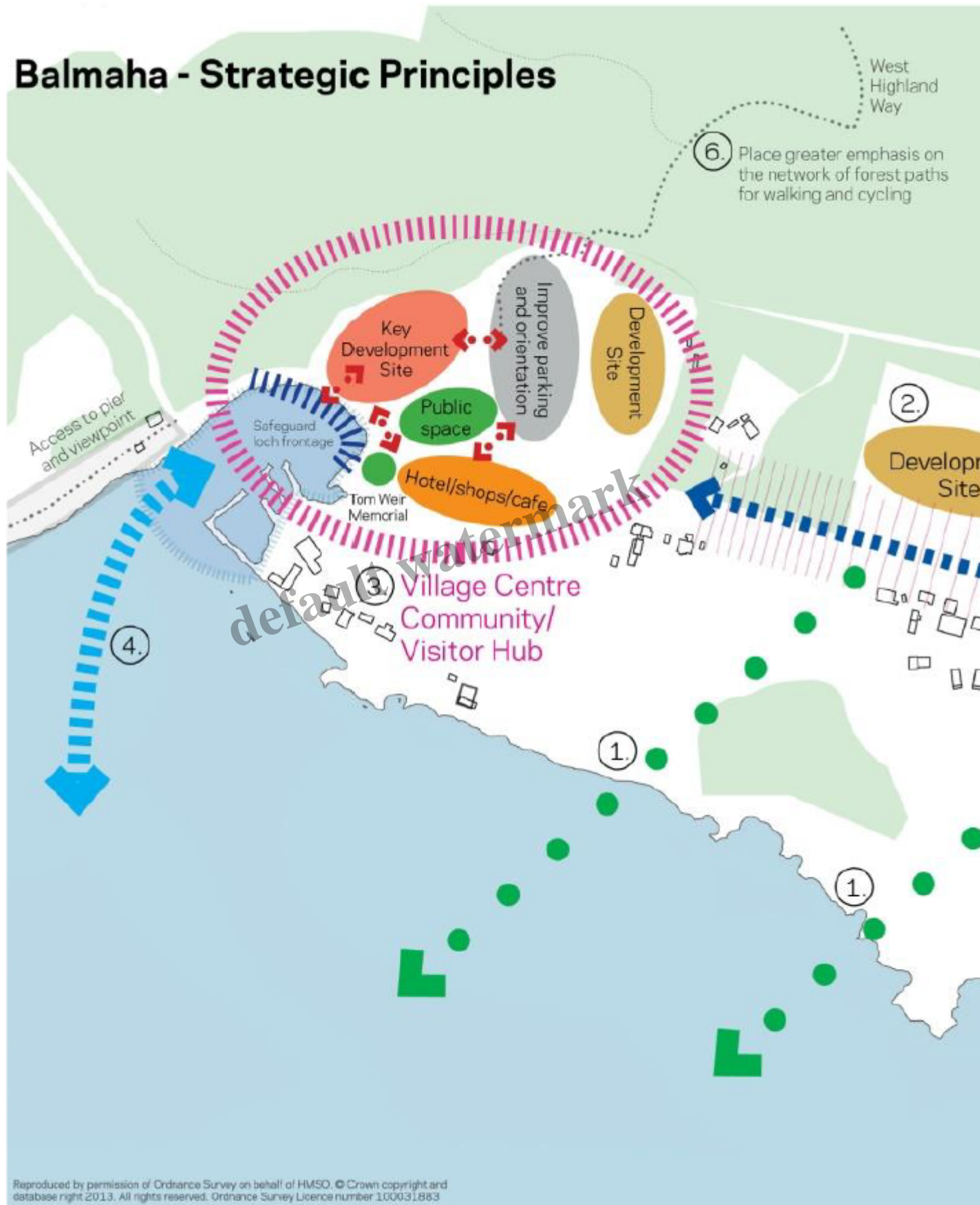
We see a continuing need to address these issues through the right combination of engagement and education, investment in facilities and, where necessary, management measures and regulation to help alleviate pressure and prevent damage.

Much public investment has already been targeted in raising the quality of visitor facilities in the busiest areas improving car parks, toilets, information points, litter facilities, viewpoints and campsites. This approach has achieved transformational improvements to East Loch Lomond and parts of The Trossachs through the 5 Lochs Visitor Management Plan. Continuing to find solutions which prevent these problems will support the more sustainable use of busy sites and give confidence for the private sector to play a role in providing visitor services.

The Park has recognised this in its new draft National Park Partnership Plan (above), which rightly states the *"the road network can become very busy at peak times"* but then in usual fashion partly blames this on visitors *"problems can be exacerbated by illegal and irresponsible parking of vehicles"*. Actually, this "problem" is what the LLTNPA was set up to address and its challenge I would suggest (its not easy) is the provision of infrastructure to support visitors, including alternative means of transport to get to popular places like Balmaha.

The Supplementary Planning Guidance, disappointingly, says almost nothing about this.

Balmaha - Strategic Principles



SPG diagram

There is a reference to improving water transport (light blue arrow) and the Sustrans cycle path (dark blue arrow) but nothing on how the issue of too many cars for too few car parking places with no alternatives will be addressed. For once I agree with Gordon Watson, the LLTNPA Chief Executive, who stated to the Stirling Observer that “additional overflow” car parking places are required. Such provision used to be available. A farmer opened up a field to provide for parking but was given no support to manage this – people set up tents to stay the weekend – so stopped doing so. This is the obvious solution, one that is used successfully in England’s National Parks, and one that should be revived, but there is no mention of this in the SPG. I suspect this is because it would require resources from the LLTNPA (such as its Rangers helping to manage traffic rather than spending time chasing away innocent campers).

The lack of join up with the East Loch Lomond Visitor Management Plan 2014-19 – which the SPG interestingly refers to as “draft” even though it is published – is glaring. That plan recognised the pattern of visitor pressure and committed to:

Establish a multi-agency peak period management regime that puts in place procedures for staff across organisations

That commitment appears to have been abandoned. Why? And who decided this?

Meantime, the transport policies in the approved National Park Development Plan would appear not to be worth the paper they are written on:

“Land will be safeguarded for, and support will be given to, the transport infrastructure proposals identified within Town or Village proposals maps”

and:

“Modal change from private car to more sustainable transport modes within settlements including the provision of integrated new or improved transport infrastructure,”

The SPG contains no hint of this vision, or of the aspiration of past plans, yet alone how land might be used to achieve this. Another opportunity to make things happen, make things better, lost. It should not be difficult. On the continent many places, not just National Parks, use school transport at

weekends and holidays to provide public transport to rural areas for visitors. Balmaha and east Loch Lomond is an obvious place to start given the road is not a through route.

The SPG contains almost nothing outdoor recreation in its broadest sense, the reason most people visit Balmaha in the first place – what the Park calls “Visitor Experience”. This is illustrated by the Balmaha strategic principles diagram (above) which includes nothing about how, once people have parked their cars in the car park, they leave the village. The green lines on the diagram indicate views to the Loch should be maintained but nothing about how people might access the loch shore and the National Nature Reserve, which is supposed to be a place people can enjoy nature. There is no obvious way to access this at present. The thinking of the LLTNPA appears to have gone backwards since the proposal, several years ago, to create a path along the loch shore south of the village (abandoned I understand because the ground is very boggy). To the north, the West Highland Way to Rowardennan offers brilliant walking but with no way to get back unless you are prepared to retrace your steps or go the full way and try your luck with a waterbus. A hop on hop off shuttle bus would open up the West Highland Way for far more people to enjoy.

There is also nothing about the lack of camping provision, the major issue being backpackers along the West Highland Way have nowhere to stop off at the natural stopping off point of Balmaha because of the camping management zone. This is the National Park’s welcome to walkers who come from all over the world. The LLTNPA in response to comments on the draft Development Plan saying a campsite was needed at Balmaha, indicated that there was nothing in the Plan to prevent this: the failure of the LLTNPA even to mention the need for a campsite in the SPG tells you I think that the LLTNPA has no intention ever of trying to make this happen. There is an obvious place for this: the former playing field, marked development site, within the pink circle in the diagram above and adjacent to where the West Highland Way enters the car park.

Developments in Balmaha

The focus of the Supplementary Guidance is on the LLTNPA’s Housing and Economic Development Policies which I believe confuses rather than clarifies matters:

New development within Balmaha should reinforce its existing development pattern and be of appropriate (generally small) scale.

What the LLTNPA means by “small-scale” however is not the same as what most people would understand by the term:

All new development should be of appropriate scale. It will be site dependant but generally groupings of 3-8 dwellings should be the most easy to set comfortably in more open landscape. Small groupings should be based on existing development patterns where one (generally larger) property faces onto the road, with other smaller properties behind. If there is a need for larger development (i.e. more than 5 houses) it should be divided by robust landscaping and areas of open land to reduce the impact of development

The Strategic Principles diagram above includes some grey lines on either side of the road (the dark blue line with arrows), increasing in density as they approach the centre of the village. This looks like the LLTNPA is proposing to allow ribbon development either side of the road even though this was not part of the Development Plan. This would explain why, unlike other settlements, the LLTNPA has not demarcated the village boundary. It also could explain why the people who I understand are the two main landowners, the Duke of Montrose and Sandy Fraser of the Oak Tree Inn, responded so positively to the draft Supplementary Guidance ([see here](#)) about opportunities for development.

The clarifications in the Supplementary Planning Guidance that the LLTNPA will allow more new build at Balmaha raises questions about why the Balmaha Plantation site (which is still waiting to go to Committee) ever needed to be earmarked for affordable housing. LLTNPA’s recently approved policy on Housing in small rural developments is that “*Development on these sites should provide for 100% affordable housing*”, so by allowing more housing at Balmaha, the need for affordable homes could be met without destroying what appears to be an area of ancient woodland. Except that, in Balmaha the SPG now qualifies that Park Policy: “*Some open market housing will be supported where this is demonstrated as necessary to help fund the provision of affordable housing on site.*” I expect the landowners will claim they can afford to construct very little affordable housing and that therefore the Balmaha Plantation site is still needed while very little affordable housing will be provided along the ribbon development. The effect of the SPG therefore will be to reinforce the current trends towards social segregation of people and housing in Balmaha.

Setting aside the question of how else to provide affordable housing, the Balmaha plantation proposal still appears to be a glaring anomaly within the context of the Development Plan and SPG. The SPG fails to refer to the LLTNPA’s Natural Environment policies – a chance to explain the claim, made by some, that the plantation is not really an Ancient Woodland site. It also fails to explain how the size and density of the Balmaha Plantation proposal fits with the definition of the type of small scale development the SPG wishes to see in the area, 16 rather than 3-8 units, with density decreasing as you move away from the village centre.

What needs to happen

The LLTNPA needs to start joining up its various plans and to start implementing actions it proposed to do in the past but has since, without explanation, abandoned.

The LLTNPA needs to revive the east Loch Lomond Visitor Management Group (which did not meet last year) but make this both representative (recreational organisations were not included) and accountable (it is not clear who signed off or agreed the last plan and the LLTNPA failed to provide any resources to make it happen).

The LLTNPA needs to start implementing its development plan policies on a consistent basis, rather than changing them so soon after they were adopted. If the LLTNPA won't abide by its own planning policies, there is no reason why anyone else should.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. camping
2. Development Plan
3. LLTNPA
4. planning
5. visitor management

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