

The Loch Achray campsite goes to planning – what needs to change

Description

One of the main arguments for National Parks in Britain and Northern Ireland has always been that planning has a key role in conservation, whether of the historical or natural heritage, and visitor management and that a dedicated National Park Authority will do this better than Local Authorities. Three matters which have been covered by parkswatchscotland are on the agenda of today's meeting of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority Planning Committee: the Loch Achray Campsite ([see here](#)), the Ledard Farm Hydro Track and the housing application for Balmaha ([see here for all papers](#)). I had considered going to the meeting today but missed the deadline for registering a request to speak. Here is what I would said about the Loch Achray campsite.

The proposed Loch Achray Campsite

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The large flat grassy area to the east of the burn where 9 “pitches” are due to be located. Due to the eroded area looks much bigger than it really is relative to the grassy sward and there are plenty of trees around the camp.

While the planning application for the Loch Achray campsite is being presented to Committee because SEPA have objected due to the risk of the site flooding, there are other matters that I believe should be being determined by Committee rather than officers.

The photographs in the Committee Report ([see here](#)) do not give a true reflection of how the site looks and specifically there are NO photographs of the large flat grassy area which floods occasionally and which has been operated by the Forestry Commission as a youth campsite for about 30 years. Those facts tell you two things. First, that wild camping type experiences are quite compatible with flooding (people just choose elsewhere if a place is flooded or stay at home). Second, that there is no need for artificial pitches, hence one of my objections to this application:

- The creation of fixed pitches destroys the camping experience. People be allowed to camp where they want. Creating raised artificial pitches on matting will destroy the character of this area and the quality of the camping experience. Rubber matting is totally unnecessary on the east side of the site where there is a fine grassy area perfect for camping.

Response: *The applicant has advised that the purpose of providing fixed pitches is to provide a flat dry area that will enhance the experience of camping using the site. It is considered that as result of the location and size of the pitches and proposed light-touch construction methods (see Paragraph 7) the overall visitor experience for users of the site shall be positive.*

In response the LLTNPA as planning authority claims the National Park as applicant believes the raised camping pitches on plastic mats will “enhance the experience” of campers using the site. No evidence is provided to support this claim and there has been no engagement with people who camp. I wonder how many of you have tried to camp on a plastic mat? Furthermore, as a National Park Authority in the Your Park plan you committed to enhancing the wild camping experience with informal style campsites. Unfortunately, what is proposed here is the opposite and contravenes Park Policy intentions on camping although, after the changes you made to the Planning Guidance on the Visitor Experience at the last Planning Committee meeting, you make no formal distinction between different types of campsite. That is fine, so long as staff and Board Members keep in the heads the fact the primary objective is to provide infrastructure that supports the wild camping experience and does not attempt to convert it into something else. This campsite should be kept as informal as possible, as it has been for many years.

The only area included in the campsite where there is any justification to create artificial pitches is on the rough and boggy ground to the west of the burn, where no-one in their right mind would camp at present: but even here, those pitches should NOT be covered in plastic matting.

The reason for these fixed pitches is LLTNPA staff appear to want to control everything campers do. This is well illustrated by the Job Description for the campsite wardens at this site which was advertised in the last month:

KEY ACCOUNTABILITIES

- Cross-checking of booking details with the team to ensure that guests booking in are assigned the correct bowls and wood as per their respective bookings;
- Managing the camping booking phonenumber from 9am to 5pm and other times when the office team are not available;
- Ensuring that guests and their parties have parking permits;
- Ensuring that guests and their parties who are staying overnight have the day of departure;
- Informing and assisting any guests who do not have a booking system;

This is no longer about wild camping, its about GUESTS and the main tasks of the wardens is to ensure these guests camp and park in their allotted places. Bureaucracy gone mad and a waste of scarce resources.

My second objection to this application is that there is no provision for campervans to dispose waste at the toilet block. The LLTNPA and the Forestry Commission have been busy promoting Forest Drive as a destination for campervans and creating more campervan permit places but without installing any facilities. This is a recipe for disaster and the creation of the campsite is an opportunity to rectify this. Instead, the LLTNPA as planning authority is saying they have no influence over the National Park as National Park Authority:

- The failure to provide any places for campervans in the parking area a failure to include a chemical disposal point for campervans at the toilet block

Response: The proposal relates to the provision of camping pitches only and the planning authority can only give consideration to what is included within the planning application.

The lack of will to join up policy aspirations is in my view a failure which you as Board Members can put right. Why campervans shouldn't be able to stop in the car parking area seems like a repeat of Loch Chon where there was no provision for campervans, although in this case at least there is other "provision" nearby on Forest Drive. But, campervans need places to dispose of waste and take on water and there is nowhere else to do this on Forest Drive. Now, this might not be the best place to do so – maybe the Forestry Commission toilet block would be better? – but unless the Planning Committee knows alternative provision is planned, it should be insisting on such provision here.

Lastly, although no objection to the proposal has been lodged on these grounds, the Committee should I think make recommendations about two other aspects of the proposals. The first is about access to the site which at present requires a five mile drive around Forest Drive when it is located just a few hundred metres from the main road:

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While situated close to the main road – campsite is orange hatched area – Forest Drive is currently closed and the site can only be accessed from the top of the Duke's Pass

This is hardly green and if you are approaching from the north, as people from Stirling might do, access requires a huge loop and will unnecessarily increase traffic on Forest Drive. So, please ask your staff to approach FCS and make the section of Forest Drive to the campsite or indeed a little further to the campervan places along Loch Achray two way.

Second, the report reveals that the campsite will only be open from 1st March to 30th September

- It should be clarified what period of time these facilities will be open each year. Given the promotion of Forest Drive by the National Park the facilities should be open all year.

Response: For this particular proposal no planning implications arise from the time period in which the site will be open and opening times is a matter for the applicant. The applicant has advised it intends to operate the site from 1st March to 30th September each year.

Every visitor survey the LLTNPA has done on facilities indicates that lack of toilets is a key issue for visitors to the National Park so why not keep the toilets here open? The Park's Director of Conservation at the September Board stated that there were significant issues with human waste in camping permit zones, and this is particularly evident on Forest Drive, so keeping the toilets here open for a longer period – or preferably year round – should be a no brainer.

While I appreciate that as members of the planning committee you may be limited in the extent you can impose formal conditions as applicants but you also sit on the Board of the LLTNPA which is the applicant in this case and therefore have the power to address the matters I have raised. I hope you will do so.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. camping
2. LLTNPA
3. natural environment
4. planning

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