

Scottish Enterprise's unspent £9.5m and a community alternative to Flamingo Land

Description

While Highlands and Islands Enterprise are receiving a public drubbing at Cairn Gorm, Scottish Enterprise has so far been very successful at keeping out of the public eye with Flamingo Land. Their attempt to subvert the planning system at the West Riverside site in Balloch ([see here](#)) is part of a much larger problem in which our Enterprise Companies put business owners before their staff and local communities. As a reminder of this, here is part of the response I received to an Information Request back in January 2017:

Question 2) about tender process: *“Achievement of SE economic objectives. Did this include any requirements/score for payment of Scottish Living Wage to those engaged through or employed by the preferred bidder?”*

Response: *“No, there was no provision for a score to be assigned for payment of the Scottish Living Wage.”*

Scottish Enterprise now values the Riverside Site as being worth just £200k

Thanks to local MSP Jackie Baillie, who met with Scottish Enterprise last week, it was revealed that Scottish Enterprise is looking for just £200k from Flamingo Land for the sale of the West Riverside site. That is over £100k less than what Flamingo Land's Managing Director, James Gibb, awarded himself as a pay rise last year. It is for a vast site. A clear example of how our Enterprise Agencies' primary purpose seems to be to channel more money into the pockets of the 1% with one means to do so being flogging off public assets on the cheap.

Scottish Enterprise has never offered the local community the chance to purchase the West Riverside Site for £200k. Imagine if, before putting the site up for sale, they had provided the local community first option to buy the site – as arguably they are supposed to do under our Land Reform and Community Empowerment Legislation – and at this price.

Instead of a community takeover being a daunting task, it would have appeared an attractive proposition. What's more, with the Scottish Land Fund now able to splash out £4.4m to enable the local community of 6 people to purchase the island of Ulva ([see here](#)), it's difficult to see why local people would have needed to raise any money for the purchase – even if Scottish Enterprise had insisted on being paid this paltry amount.

The supporters of Flamingo Land, from what I have heard, might well accept that the site is worth a lot more than this. However, they then go on to argue that the local community could never raise the money necessary to develop and manage the site. The argument here is that we need to be realistic about austerity, that it won't go away, and we therefore sadly have no choice except to get very rich

people in to fund developments. Then, if there is a cost to that, such as inappropriate developments or local communities not getting what they want, no to mention low paid jobs, well, we just have to thole it.

There is money to fund a community alternative – all it needs is political will

The argument that there is no alternative to private investment at the Riverside Site has been blown out the water by the revelations at the Scottish Parliament this week ([see here](#)) that Scottish Enterprise had failed to spend £9.5m from one of its grant funds. Its who Scottish Enterprise choose to fund that is the issue, not the availability of funds. If this money was now allocated to the local community to develop and fund new plans for the West Riverside Site imagine what could happen:

- Instead of a large hotel and resort on the loch shore, a low lying state of the art heritage centre, designed around the steam slipway and other listed sites by the pier, which celebrated local history and the local environment. I know which I would visit.
- The aspirations for a pedestrian bridge over the River Leven, linking the pier head with Balloch Country Park, could at last be realised
- Green areas could be kept green, reducing capital investment costs but ensuring the area remained attractive to local people and visitors alike, giving opportunities to experience wildlife worthy of the National Park
- New and improved facilities for local water sports – where Balloch is ideally located – for informal both informal and business use

In its application for Planning Permission in Principle Flamingo Land contained no provision for any such developments, with hints being given that “sadly” they did not have the funds available. Actually, the issue is Flamingo Land just like other profit driven companies does not want to “invest” in anything that does not have a direct financial return and inflate their Directors’ salaries still further. In the world of private finance, community benefits go out the window.

The £9.5m underspend is therefore an ideal opportunity for the Scottish Government to puts its money where its mouth is when it comes to community empowerment. It should tell Scottish Enterprise to make this money available to fund a community alternative to the West Riverside Site at Balloch. I hope that organisations like Balloch and Haldane Community Council, which have continued to support the development against local opinion, will have a re-think and call for public investment in the site.

Category

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